

August 14, 2016
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Sermon - "Routine Maintenance"

It feels good to be back.

I hope that your summer has been a peaceful one.

My time away was enriching, rejuvenating and educational.

I had the luxury of time – time to study, time to visit with family and friends and time to remember.

By slowing the pace of my life, I was able to pay closer attention to the details.

I started off by attending to all of the routine maintenance required by both our bodies and our possessions.

I had all the recommended annual checkups and medical tests-

I am quite healthy;

I took the car in for service, deadheaded the plants, returned library books.

I took two classes – Asian Religions and Novel Muslims and completed the reading and writing assignments- which finish my course requirements for my Doctorate in Ministry (I still need to complete the *Peace Through Understanding* project and write a dissertation).

When all of the lingering tasks were complete, I was able to visit with family and friends, free of distracting responsibilities.

For the first time in ten years I spent a Sunday morning with my sons.

As the days unfolded I remained committed to being outside as much as possible, something the weather cooperated with beautifully.

I was able to hike for hours, quietly ruminating on whatever came to mind.

This quiet led me to a lot of remembering.

As we just heard in Paul's letter to the Hebrews, as well as in the earlier readings this morning, remembering is an important part of faith.

When we remember, we are able to reflect on where we have been often shedding light on where we are now and where we might go next.

Our lives have taken on a busyness that often precludes thinking beyond the immediate moment.

But our memories can serve to remind us of who we are while clarifying the root of our values.

Let me share a few examples:

My father died a year ago this week after nearly ten years of Alzheimer's disease.

I found that my memories of him were most often of those last ten years when I was responsible for him, so I took a day to visit the town where I grew up, Ridgefield, to rebuild my memories.

I drove through the neighborhood where my family lived from 1957-1982. My father had built two houses on the same street, twelve years apart. Each house has been substantially remodeled and the wooded paths we played on were now landscaped yards, however, I was able to remember the joy of playing outside in the summer, of sledding in the driveway and of walking to my friend's house each day.

Next, I went to the center of town where my father had his real estate office for 25 years. I parked the car and walked, as he had done daily, up one side of the Main Street and back down the other. I bought a sandwich and sat in the park, remembering my parents playing with my children in the playground.

I remembered how much my father had loved Ridgefield and how proud he was of the growth and prosperity that the town enjoyed. I went and stood in his office, (now vacant) and remembered the energy he put into every single sale he ever made.

I came away from my nostalgic foray with a renewed set of images of my father.

I was able to put aside those final pictures and replace them with memories of laughter and joy.

Another story from my time away: I was visiting my friend Susan at her beautiful home on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Susan and her husband, Steve, have owned this home for over twenty years over which time their economic circumstances have fluctuated. The day that I was there Steve was meeting with contractors who had been recruited to assess the crumbling sea wall that protects their yard from eroding into the bay.

The first fellow suggested that they would have to tear down the existing wall, bring in at least twelve trucks of stone down the tree-lined driveway, over the beautiful lawn to the construction site. He estimated that it would take weeks and would cost about \$60,000, which my friends could not afford.

The second man who came was accompanied by two of his sons, all natives of the area. They looked carefully at each stone that had fallen from the wall and suggested that they could use all of those old stones to rebuild the wall and would need about a week and the cost would be \$9,000, which was affordable.

The contractors each viewed the project through their own personal lens. One saw opportunity to make a lot of money and one saw a way that he could use his skill to help this struggling family.

I particularly liked the idea that the second proposal included using all of the rocks that were already there – bringing the past into the present and using it to meet the current need.

This, my friends, is what I call grace.

God lets us remember what is good, especially when we get bogged down by thinking about what is wrong – or what must get done.

These past two months when I have been away from you the world has suffered much turmoil. There have been two contentious political conventions, multiple terrorist acts, episodes of violence, deaths of loved ones – it has seemed a dark summer for many.

However, into this darkness comes the light of memories, the cloud of witnesses who are standing by to offer us fortitude and grace.

We are reminded that we are not the first people to live through tumultuous times.

God's people have always faced hardship, enemies, threats and fear.

But God's people have also always been comforted by, saved by, accompanied by God.

The last week of my sabbatical I picked up a short book of essays by Frederick Buechner (Beekner).

Buechner is “an American writer and theologian who has authored more than thirty published books and has been an important source of inspiration and learning for many readers.

His work encompasses many genres, including fiction, autobiography, essays, sermons, and other nonfiction. Buechner's books have been translated into twenty-seven languages for publication around the world.

His website notes that Buechner's writing has often been praised for its ability to inspire readers to see the grace in their daily lives.”

This is the gift that I received from his small book of essays.

One in particular titled “A Room Called Remember” recounts his experience of having one of those dreams from which you awake knowing that you have had a glimpse of truth – “truer than any you knew that you knew, if only a truth about yourself.” (104)

In Buechner's dream he finds himself in a hotel room somewhere in what he describes as “a room that I loved.”

He says it was not the look of the room, but the feel.

It made him “feel happy and at peace, where everything seemed the way it should be and everything about myself seemed the way it should be too.”

As the dream went on he wandered away and eventually found his way back to this same hotel where he was assigned a different room – one that he did not like.

Upon inquiry at the front desk he was told that he could have the other room anytime he asked for it by name...the name of the room was Remember.” (105)

Buechner goes on to describe the feelings of healing and blessing that come from remembering.

His description resonated with my own experience of remembering: “The sense of peace that filled me in that room, the knowledge that I could return to it whenever I wanted to or needed to—that was where the healing and the blessing came from.”

My friends, I do not want you to live in the past but I want you to gather from your past the important memories that define you, that shaped you.

Much of our faith is rooted in the routine tasks of remembering.

Our communion celebration each month is a remembrance of Christ’s sacrifice for us.

Our gathering each week is for the purpose of remembering our scriptures, our prayers, our neighbors, our God.

In this tumultuous time in which we live, I want you to remember who you are and what it means to you to be a Christian.

Pay attention to the routine tasks of faith for if they are neglected you may find yourself shabby and run down.

Paul leaves us with a clear reminder:

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.”