

RE-MEMBERING  
(Gen. 50:15-21; Matt. 18:21-35)

The organization that hosted our mission trip to Pine Ridge last summer is called: Re-Member. The name is appropriate because being there was about re-remembering in two senses. It was a reminder of how badly we've treated the Lakota and other native peoples. But it also let us take a tiny step toward healing the past and putting things back together. It was a time to remember and a time to re-member.

You may have seen previews for a new TV series this fall. It's called "Unforgettable" and it's about a cop who can't forget and who remembers everything. That perfect memory is somehow supposed to enable her to catch the bad guys.

That's not how memory works for most of us. We recall bits and pieces of the past – a sound, a smell, an emotion. And then we fit those bits and pieces together in a way that creates a memory, which may or may not have anything to do with reality. Remembering in that familiar sense and re-remembering in the sense of putting things back together are linked because retrieving memories and fitting them together and reflecting on them can be a healing act in and of itself.

Both of those senses pertain on this Recovenanting Sunday.

Today we remember the covenant that brought West Parish Church into being 186 years ago. Those forty founding families pledged their faithfulness to God and to one another. They entered into a covenant that defined the kind of community they wanted and were determined to be.

Covenant is at the very heart of our Congregational tradition. When our Pilgrim ancestors reached Cape Cod they made a covenant called the Mayflower Compact, in which they "solemnly and mutually, in the presence of God, and one another, covenant[ed] and combine[d] [them]selves together." They understood that the Christian life is always life in relationship, to God and fellow members.

But the idea of covenant goes back a lot further than that. The covenant God made with Abraham brought the children of Israel into being – and the Israelites remembered that covenant. For 200 years after the Exodus they Israelites didn't have any kind of central government. All that held them together was the covenant. They were intentional about renewing the covenant from time to time so they would never forget.

We renew our covenant – or recovenant – for the same reason the Israelites did: because memory does fade and so we don't forget the basics of who and what we are. Recovenanting calls us to remember our purpose. Recovenanting links us with our past and reconnects us as a community. Why are we here? What kind of community are we? What do we owe to one another? (Read covenant together)

Who are we? What kind of community are we? What do we owe one another? Those questions are way too big for one sermon. What I want to

consider this morning is a more limited question: What kind of community are we in light the tragedy we remember and commemorate today.

Nine years ago, for the first anniversary of 9/11, the UCC published a book of reflections on that awful day. It was a book for the church, complete with a study guide and worship ideas. But it was also a book about the church and how the church responds to crisis. What kind of community are we called to be in a world where unspeakable and incomprehensible acts of violence occur? When things go appallingly wrong are we the same kind of community that we are when things are peaceful and serene? Does the fact that some enemy does us terrible harm somehow change who we are?

We can talk nonchalantly about loving our enemies when we don't have any. We say "turn the other cheek" when no one is slapping us in the face. We're ready to forgive when no one is doing us wrong. But then push comes to shove and buildings come crashing down and thousands of lives are snuffed. What then? It's not so easy to take the high road.

9/11 was one of those defining moments that shook this country to its core. It's a date we will remember and not forget. In the course of an hour we became vulnerable, no longer immune to threats that are a daily reality to much of the world. But it's also worth remembering that terrorism didn't erupt on the world stage on 9/11. The residents of Nanking and Belfast and Dresden knew about terrorism long before 9/11.

Putting 9/11 into a bigger contest isn't to downplay its horror or to ignore the strong emotions it stirred up. Confusion, anger, hate, an urge to strike back – all those feelings were understandable. And Christians weren't exempt from any of them.

The wounds of 9/11 are still with us. They haven't yet healed.

So as the church we're faced with the question: What kind of community are we called to be after 9/11? Do we have something distinctive or unique to offer to the process of healing and re-membering?

History is full of times when the church lost its way and forgot its identity and purpose, when it failed to be the kind of community God calls it to be: the Crusades in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, the religious wars in Europe in the wake of the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the support the German Christians gave to Hitler and the Nazis in the 1930s – none of those were shining hours in the life of the church.

In each of those cases, the church lost its way because it ceased to be a community shaped by the cross. We lose our way when we don't take the cross seriously because it's the cross that shows us how God goes about redeeming the world. And God's way is very different from the world's.

Take one example. World War I was fought for the noblest of goals. Woodrow Wilson asked Congress to declare war on Germany so the world might "be made safe for democracy" and he believed that this was going to be the "war to end all wars." Wilson was wrong – idealistic, yes, but tragically wrong. There's a straight line from World War I to Fascism and National Socialism, which were hardly democratic, and to the bloodiest war the world has ever

known. War is never the way to heal whatever is wrong with the world. But it's the way nations understand and resort to most often.

God has different answer, which we see in today's readings.

Consider Joseph. His brothers sold him into slavery. Can you imagine a worse kind of betrayal? But then the tables are turned and Joseph's got power and his brothers are groveling at his feet, fully expecting him to treat them the same way they treated him – to show no mercy, to even the score, to repay them in kind. That's the world's way. That's what they expected. But Joseph shows them another way. He is magnanimous. He doesn't retaliate, he forgives. He sees God's hand at work in all his brothers' plotting. By showing mercy Joseph manages to redeem his brothers' evil schemes. He puts his family back together. He re-members.

In Matthew, Jesus tells a story about forgiveness – extravagant forgiveness – and about mercy and, by the way, about how God looks upon those who don't show mercy and forgiveness.

And in case anyone didn't get the point of the story, Jesus finally shows us exactly what mercy and forgiveness look like. He shows us from the cross. In his teaching, in his life, and in his death, Jesus revealed a God of nonviolence, a God of forgiveness and mercy and reconciliation and healing, a God who puts things back together.

But the cross doesn't stand alone. After Good Friday comes Easter, after the cross comes the empty tomb – our assurance that God's power is at work in the world to transform defeat into victory, our assurance that God can redeem even the most heinous act.

The church exists because of Good Friday and Easter. The church exists because God can transform evil into good. If there weren't evil in the world, there would be no need for the church. But there is. And so the church exists to be a community that stands beneath the cross, a community of justice and peace, a community of hope and healing, a community of transformation and reconciliation, a community that remembers and re-members.

Today we remember as we renew our covenant . Today we remember and pray for all who lost their lives or who lost friends or loved ones on 9/11. Today we remember and pray for those who have given their lives and limbs in the "war on terror." Today we remember and pray for the people of Iraq and Afghanistan. Today we remember and pray for our Muslim brothers and sisters in this country who are looked upon with suspicion and even hate. Today we remember our nation's highest ideals and pray for its wounds to be healed.

And today we remember that we are a community shaped by the cross and pray for ourselves, that we might give ourselves to the work of re-membering our community, our nation, and our world.