

Memories With a Future

Richard A. Rhem
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

"I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth." Genesis 9:13

"This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me...This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." I Corinthians 11:24-25

I have a new book. It's entitled *The Care of the Soul* by Thomas Moore. It is a recent publication and it has made the Best Seller list which, I think, is unusual for a book about the care of the soul. Thomas Moore is not writing necessarily from the Christian perspective. I don't know really where he stands there, but he is writing about the malaise of the 20th-century human person whose soul lacks depth, or who is rather soul-less and, therefore, gets caught up in all kinds of addictions and obsessions, and violence, and has no depth dimension to his or her person. Moore is a psychologist and he says that no longer can we afford the luxury of a bifurcation between psychology as a secular science and spirituality as a religious dimension, that really the health of the human person involves that depth dimension of soul. We must care for our souls. One of the things that he suggests is that we simply must observe, pay attention, attend to our lives, our soul, our moods, to just what's happening in us, our responses, our attitudes, and our spirit.

Thomas Moore makes an interesting connection with our celebration this morning, because he speaks of ritual observances. He notes that the word observance has within it serv (s-e-r-v), which in the original from which the word is derived had to do with the tending of sheep. So an observance is really a *tending* of the dimensions of the soul. Moore says it is important that we engage in ritual observances - that ritual observances have a way of forming us in our depths. When I read that, I recognized that there is a part of me which is so under-developed. I am about 98% head. I am always thinking. And I am always trying to understand. That's a reflection of my tradition, which has nurtured me in biblical story and faith meaning, the Catechism, the structure of the faith. In recent years I have been recognizing that there is a sacramental dimension to Christian experience that was not well developed for me, and I have been groping

for that, to find that depth dimension that doesn't denigrate the mind, doesn't eliminate the importance of understanding, but is able to get to the heart and to the primal core of our being. That's what ritual does.

We have never done ritual very well. My whole tradition, my whole experience has not had an appreciation for the spiritual shaping, the spiritual formation of ritual observances. As I reflected on that I thought, that is what we are about when we come to gather around the table of our Lord. We have tried so hard to understand the relationship of bread to body, and wine to blood, and what actually happens. What is that transaction of bread and wine to us, received in faith and in the spirit? I recognize again my flaw, which is always trying to understand rather than being able somehow or other to turn off my brain, even momentarily and *experience*, and in that ritual observance to be shaped and formed.

Then I came across a phrase that became a window for me - really a wonderful illuminating moment. One would think at this advanced age that one had thought every thought possible, and come across every possible combination of explanation of what this experience is all about. But then I read this phrase from Walter Bruggeman in one of his Old Testament studies: "Memories With A Future." Suddenly that juxtaposition of words just struck fire for me. "Memories With A Future." Sometimes words juxtaposed, put together in unusual fashion can bring flashes of illumination. "Memory" refers usually to the past, to memories of pleasure or of pain. And we think of the future, which we move toward with anticipation, either of desire or of hope, or of dread. But to think of "Memories With A Future," suddenly I said, "That's what happens in the sacrament when Jesus invites us to remember him and in that remembering to experience his presence and to appropriate *again* that future that he promised us." Suddenly, past and future intersect this present moment in the sacramental participation.

"Memories With A Future."

Now memory can be employed negatively. In the opening verses of Psalm 137, we certainly can identify with the exile from Jerusalem, a captive in Babylon, his tormentors saying, "Sing us a song of Zion." He says, "My heart is broken. How can I sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" Then he vows, "If I forget thee O, Jerusalem...may my right hand be cut off." And then, that triggers a response of vengeance. Were you surprised that I read the Psalm through to the end? Where he would delight in having the little ones dashed against the rock? Certainly a holy, unworthy emotion. Were you amazed perhaps that it should even come to expression in the scripture? Ah, but it is a very human emotion. Very common, and of which we are all capable. Twist the soul, oppress, torment and there is that response - vengeful, hateful, seen all too often in our own world today. Bosnia Herzegovina, those ancient feuds becoming the alignment of religious group against religious group. The Middle East - Israel, Lebanon, Syria - Jew, Muslim.

Psalm 137 causes us to cringe at the image of little ones dashed against the rock, because we recognize that it is a part of us. This is also a self-destructive use of memory.

But there is a positive use of memory and that is that to which Jesus pointed when he said, "Take this bread. Remember me. Take this cup. Remember me until I come." The old communion liturgy had all those dimensions in it. A feast of remembrance, of communion in the present, and of hope. A sacrament is the intersection of the past and the future, and the present moment of participation. And the participation, the ritual observance repeated, repeated, repeated. Ah, in my tradition, in my growing up, I was taught that that repetition was merely ritualism. What my tradition and what I never recognized was that it is in that very repetitious observance that I am shaped down here, in the gut, and we become a community shaped around the memory that has a future, a memory of Jesus the way he was, the life he lived, the death he suffered, the resurrection he experienced, and the Shalom to which he calls us. "Memory With A Future." The past event always aimed toward that consummation of all things "when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God."

God's people have always been nurtured by signs, by ritual observances. The earliest sign in the biblical narrative was the rainbow. After the flood, a judgment on a perverse world, on creation gone awry, the Creator says, "Never again. Never again." The change was not in human nature. The change was not in the creation. The change was in the Creator. "Never again," God says. "Never again will I destroy it all. Never again. I enter into covenant faithfulness with all the earth and with every living creature." This is the earliest covenant. This covenant is broader than the covenant with Abraham. This is the covenant of God with the whole creation, God saying, "I will never abandon it. I will never let it go, and I will set my bow in the cloud and when you see my bow in the cloud I will see the bow and I will remember, and you will know that I will be faithful." Isaiah 54 references Noah and the bow, and then the prophet sings, "The mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love will not depart from you. The covenant of my peace will not be removed, says the Lord who has mercy upon you." The rainbow triggered in the poet the deep assurance of the steadfast love and faithfulness of God. The rainbow triggered a memory still potent for the future.

Some of you know that, a little over a month ago, I conducted the funeral service for a beautiful little angel twenty-one months old. The reason that I conducted the service at the Spring Lake Presbyterian Church was the fact that Reverend Anderson is new there and didn't really know the family, and the grandmother of the little child, whose name was Paige, was a childhood friend of Nancy, and they continue friends to this day and we had become friends as couples. The mother of the little child was a school friend of Lynn, so because of our intimate connection with the family I was asked to do the service. I met with the family the day before the funeral and they manifested remarkable faith and trust in God. They live in

Wisconsin where little twenty-one months old Paige scooted away, as a child will, and got to an open gate of a neighbor's pool and under the solar cover and died. They had a service in their own community, but because of their connections here they wanted a service here in this community. As I sat with them they told me about their trip from Wisconsin to Grand Haven. It was a Saturday night; in fact it was June 26, and on that Saturday evening as they drove in their van with a casket on board, they drove into a rainbow. The rainbow arched the highway. Their little seven year old, Megan, who is a bit of a mystic, who knew long before the doctors knew that her "Mommy" was carrying twins, said, "Look, Paige is painting rainbows." For a moment there was a double rainbow as though a second one for the twin.

They told me this story and asked me about the connection with the biblical story, and I said to them, "It is the oldest sign in creation of the faithfulness of God." I used it for the funeral meditation, the sign of God's covenant faithfulness in the midst of their loss and pain, that God would be with them and was with them. The sign of a rainbow, which forever after for them will trigger a "Memory That Has a Future."

Last evening I called Ron and Patrice Frantz to tell them that I would tell that story, wanting them to be prepared as they came to worship this morning. Just before Elise Joy died last fall, having been born a twin with her sister Leigh, and having continued complications, but developing into a blooming delightful child of her own person, just before she died with no premonition at the time that she would die, Patrice took the two girls in her arms to the window of their home overlooking Lake Michigan where there was a beautiful rainbow.

Patrice said to me, "Is that a sign?" I said, "That is a sign." And I used this scripture for Elise Joy's funeral, where we celebrated the life, however brief, of Elise Joy. Then Patrice said to me, "I cannot believe that you called. We were just talking about you." In a rather emotional weekend after attending an annual conference where Elise had been with them last year, they experienced the loss of her presence this year with people who hadn't known that she had died. And, therefore, all of the freshness of that loss was brought to the surface again. Then on the way home they stopped at the cemetery for the first time to see the gravestone. There was something about the stone that they wanted to ask me about, so they had been talking about calling me. Then I said, "This is why I am calling . . ." Patrice said, "Can I tell you one more thing? Not an hour ago Leigh went to the box that still has Elise's toys and took out a music box and brought it to me and I wound it up, and it began to play "Somewhere Over The Rainbow." Does God send God's angels to sustain and keep us? Does God keep God's promises of steadfast love and faithfulness? Every time Ron and Patrice or Sarah and Morrey, whose twins were born near each other in time, both of which now have one treasure in heaven, every time they see the rainbow they will have a memory that will bring tears, but through the tears will shine a hope that sees beyond the years to that time when we shall be gathered all together in the

presence of the Lord. For Jesus said, "Remember me and know that I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, that where I am there you may be also. Because I live, you too shall live.

The seer on the island of Patmos had a vision in which he saw a new heaven and a new earth, and the dwelling of God with God's people. He said, "Behold I make all things new. I will wipe every tear from your eye and there shall be no more crying or pain, nor death any more. For the former things have passed away."

This morning you are invited to take bread and cup, and to remember. But the memory of that one in our past has a future – of a time when we shall be gathered at the banquet table of our Lord. Come then. The Master is here and calls for you. All things are ready.