

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
East Liberty Presbyterian Church
November 7, 2010
Luke 22:14-19
“Remembering”

Not many people would venture onto Miss Rita’s porch. She lived alone in a big house set back from the road. She mostly kept to herself and was widely considered to be eccentric, if not a bit strange. If the weather was mild, you’d often see her out on her porch, sitting in a wooden rocking chair, watching the world go by. The two children who lived a few houses down from Rita were some of the few persons willing to engage this older woman. In the evening, they’d often stroll up her front walk and join her on the front porch until they heard their mother call them back home for supper. This older sister-younger brother combination loved what other folks found peculiar, namely, that the first words that came out of Rita’s mouth, whenever she met someone, would invariably be unusual and unexpected. Rita was never one to put much stock in social pleasantries. However, the children had learned that if you simply wait a bit and let Miss Rita finish her comments, then the opening remarks usually made quite a bit of sense. Sadly, most people didn’t have the patience for this.

One afternoon the two siblings went over to sit on Miss Rita’s porch; and for a while, the trio simply enjoyed the sunny fall afternoon and watched a fat sparrow splash in a neighbor’s birdbath. After a moment, Rita said, “You know, Russell collected equestrian statues.” Kid’s Rule #1 with Miss Rita: Never comment on the opening phrase but count to 10 and wait for the next sentence before responding. Silence. The sparrow in the birdbath flew away as the neighbor’s cat came around the corner. Rita went on: “Russell didn’t collect the statues themselves. He collected photographs and postcards of equestrian statues from all over the world.”

The boy broke his silence and asked what “equestrian” meant. Rita told him that it referred to men on horseback; and that lots of famous generals were honored in public places with statues of them in full uniform riding their favorite horses. Supposedly, there was a special code in these statues: the more legs the horse had off the ground in the statue, the more noble the general’s death. Two or three legs in the air – the soldier died in battle. All four hooves firmly planted in the soil – the general died snoring in his featherbed. As the story unfolded, Russell was Rita’s older brother; he had so loved the equestrian statue of Prince Eugene in Vienna that he had decided to collect a picture of every horse and rider statue in the world. After his death some years ago, the family had found 17 scrapbooks devoted to Russell’s hobby. When a picture of the equestrian statue of Bartholomew Colleoni in Venice had coincidentally appeared in the morning newspaper, it had prompted Rita to imagine Russell clipping out that photo for his collection.

The girl spoke up. “I remember my grandfather used to collect stamps from foreign countries. When he was alive, I would help him sort out piles of stamps on his kitchen table.” “Do you think of him when you see pretty stamps on envelopes today?”, asked Rita. “No, not really,” admitted the girl. “Ah, then you’re not remembering properly. Why, almost every day I remember Russell, my parents, Moses, even Jesus.”

Now despite Rule #1, the kids felt they had to respond to this comment. “How can you remember Moses and Jesus? They lived a long time before you were even born.” “I guess I’ve never explained to you about the two types of *remembering*.” Rita stopped rocking and fixed her gaze on the girl and her little brother. “Most people think remembering is just taking a trip down memory lane, shutting out the world around you to escape to a time long past. Your calendar might say it is 2010, but people tell stories about the “good ol’ days” long gone. They re-live past glories and dimly remembered adventures riding on charter buses of the memory – traveling from the living present back to the dead past.”

“But there’s another way to remember and that’s to summon the dead past into the living present.¹ When I saw that picture in this morning’s paper, I imagined Russell carefully cutting it out and carrying the appropriate album to the kitchen table and adding it to his collection right there before my eyes. I remembered him and he was with me in the ‘now’ of this morning. Do you see the difference?” The kids looked perplexed, so Rita tried a different approach.

“To remember things is to re-collect them, to gather up memories close at hand. Now some folks gather up their memories like a pile of fall leaves and then they burrow down deep into that pile. They hide away from the here and now, from the present moment, as they think back to times long ago – when they were younger and healthier, when folks now gone were still with them; you know how that is. But sometimes you can remember people and events and carry them around with you, like they were in your pocket, so that those memories are part of what you experience that new day. Seeing that photo of an equestrian statue made me think of Russell and remembering him was like having him back in the house with me, right here on the porch swing. So in a real way, Russell and I were here enjoying this day together when you came to visit.”

Suddenly that old house set back from the road seemed alive again with more folks than just Miss Rita living and moving around its rooms. Rita went on: “Remembering is a special gift of God. It’s been an important part of faith lives ever since Noah remembered God’s love every time he saw a rainbow; ever since Abraham remembered God’s promises every time he pondered the stars of the sky. It was there when Moses was sent by God back into Egypt, where he had fled from years before, in order that he might lead God’s people out of slavery and into the Promised Land. Moses told Pharaoh to let God’s people go, and when he finally relented, the Hebrew folk didn’t have much time to pack. There wasn’t even time for something as simple as letting the yeast rise in their bread dough. So they ate unleavened bread and from that day onward, when they have their Passover meal, they tell the story and eat the unleavened bread and remember everything – and it’s like Moses is right there with them again. And when I remember that story, I picture Moses leading that great line of people into their new, God-given future; and then I picture my own life, and whatever trouble I’m facing, I picture Moses right beside me, leading me to God’s promised land even today.”

The children giggled at seeing Miss Rita all worked up like this, and at the thought of Moses and her sitting there in rocking chairs on her front porch; and she smiled at them, aware of their thoughts. “Yes, I’ll admit it’s a little awkward imagining Moses right here

¹ Cf. Frederick Buechner

beside us. It's a lot easier with Jesus – much easier. Mostly because we were all told to do just that."

The children leaned in a bit closer, puzzled. Rita continued: "Jesus and his friends were gathered around a table in Jerusalem, remembering Moses and Pharaoh, the unleavened bread and how God had led them to freedom. Then Jesus took some bread and broke it and said 'Remember me when you eat this bread.' At the time they were confused by his words, but later, after they had witnessed that horrible sight of Jesus dying a broken, lonely man on the cross, they remembered how he had compared himself to a broken, torn piece of bread...a bread that nonetheless fed them and sustained them on their own journey to the Promised Land. Whenever the disciples would gather to eat that bread, they remembered his sacrifice, his resurrection, and his promise to be with them always, even to the end of the age. In a real way, every piece of bread we eat reminds us of Christ, and remembering him brings him back beside us – and we act differently – we are different – because of that."

Rita's voice got softer. "I think of you kids most every day, which means that I am carrying a bit of who you are around with me. Wherever I am, you are with me when I remember you. I hope that there is a bit of me with you wherever you are as well. And maybe because of this conversation, you also have with you Russell and his horse statues, Moses and the unleavened bread, and Jesus smiling across a table at you."

The evening was starting to make its presence known, through shadows on the yard and a darkening haze descending on the trees around them. Rita turned toward the horizon and offered one last image. "You know, when Jesus died, there were two men crucified beside him. The bible tells us a bit about them. One criminal recognized that Jesus was condemned to die despite being an innocent man. And when the other began to make fun of Jesus, this first criminal came to his defense. And daring to break the silence with a few final words, he said, "Jesus, remember me – re-collect me – when you come into your kingdom. Gather me up in your heart and mind, so that where you will be, I, too, might be found." And in answer to that prayer, Jesus gave him a promise: "Today you will be with me in Paradise. You will be remembered." And that made all the difference in the world.

The sound of a metal pan being rung with a wooden spoon could be heard from down the street. It was the archaic yet effective way the children's mother called them home for supper. As the kids got up to go, Rita said: "It was nice to talk about Russell and Moses and Jesus with you. God remembers us and simply wants us to return the favor." They waved goodbye and bounced down the steps, leaving with more than they had come with – and knowing that in a real way there would be extra people around the dinner table that evening.

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