

"SAINTS, SINNERS AND SACRIFICE"  
MATTHEW 5: 1-12

November 2, 2008, All Saints Celebration/Stewardship  
University Church of Chicago  
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Memory and meaning are interconnected, inextricable. What we remember affects what is meaningful for us, and what we find meaningful affects what we remember. When we read those lections this morning which recounted the multitudes of witnesses that John saw, "from all tribes and peoples and tongues, I was reminded not only of their lives but also of others whose fidelity and courage have touched us.

There are a lot of aspects of science that I do not understand, and I know that I will never have the time to explore them. But one part of recent research that has intrigued me is studies of the human brain and how the brain imparts both memory and meaning. Roy L. Smith told about an old Swedish immigrant, a man who lived in a rooming house years ago on Foster Avenue. The old man suffered a stroke and was taken to Swedish Covenant Hospital. There the doctors and nurses heard him in his delirium reciting the New Testament in perfect Koine Greek. Everybody who knew him knew that the old man had never studied Greek, had, in fact, a very limited education. When they began to unravel the mystery of his fluency in Greek, they remembered that a Greek New Testament scholar who taught at North Park Seminary had lived in the room adjacent to the old immigrant. Everything the scholar had recited had imprinted itself on the old man's brain.

Recent research has validated that story. Brain studies show that everything which happens to us in some way is "imprinted" on our brains. It's all there: every memory, every event, every word. So much, in fact, that we have to filter through the trivial memories in order to get to the important imprints. Everything we experience is captured by the brain, but we cannot recollect it all because only certain experiences become truly memorable. And what we remember becomes vitally important in determining the meaningfulness of our lives.

Two aspects of this research appeal to me. First, as a Southerner for whom as William Faulkner said, "The past is not dead; it's not

even past," memory is vital. We Southerners live by stories, by memory. When that great Southern Catholic writer, Walker Percy, received the National Book Award, he was asked why the South has turned out such great writers. He replied, "Because we lost the War."

Mr. Percy meant something more than memory and stories were involved. He meant that the South has experienced the Fall, the consequences of its sins, the depth of despair.

The second aspect of brain research and these permanent imprints that appeals to me is that I can now justify lapses in memory. When you get to be my age, you wonder about the increasing number of those "mature moments," when you cannot remember a name, a place, a face, an event. So, as I keep telling our children, my problems of memory are not due to age but to overload. My computer-like brain has been overwhelmed by all the books, all the people, all the travels, all the things I have to do, all the meetings.

I want to define what it means to trust God within the lives of three people. Because the making of meaning depends on memory, we have no unique identity and no sense of continuity without connecting to the past. **Who** we are, in other words, depends on **what** we remember.

Therefore, let me first introduce you to one of the saints who died several years ago in a Veterans Administration Hospital in Guthrie, Oklahoma. His name is Willis Gibson, and he greatly influenced my life when I was a twenty-five-year-old new husband, new father, part-time pastor, part-time student and part-time football coach in Luther, Oklahoma. Willis was the town drunk.

Do you see his prematurely gray hair? His flashing blue eyes? The three-day stubble of beard? The deeply lined face? Do you see how handsome Willis must have been when he and Mildred Wilson were married, when he, too, was a young father? I still count Willis among the best friends I have ever had and one of my mentors in the faith. Oh, I suppose some people back in Luther would be outraged at my calling him a saint, but they never understood Willis. The apostle Paul had a loose interpretation of the word "saint." He called people like you and me, ordinary, struggling Christians by that title.

Willis was an alcoholic, no doubt about that. He tried desperately to stop drinking, and when he was sober, he was as good a worker as the Oklahoma oil fields ever had. When he drank, he didn't harm anybody; he just messed up his life and the lives of those who loved him. He hung around a lot at the tiny parsonage Marilyn and our firstborn, Jim, and I lived in. There was no telling when Willis would turn up, but you could count on his knocking on the door at the most inopportune times.

He would come in while we were entertaining friends or family and plop himself down at the table. Willis wouldn't eat much, but he would regale (or horrify) our guests with stories about his travels and his exploits. You could mention almost any city, town or village in North America, and Willis would say, "Oh, yeah, I know that place. I was in jail there in \_\_\_\_." When our guest would recoil in disbelief, Willis would remember the name of the local sheriff in that burg and could describe its main street as well as its incarceration facility in great detail.

But Willis was most of all a seeker after God. He was a deeply religious person who could never quite apprehend the doctrine of grace. He lived by guilt, was motivated by his fear of hell. Try as I might--and did--I could never get Willis to understand the basic Biblical truth: that God is seeking us far more than we ever seek God, that God forgives and is gracious, that God does not want any children to perish.

I count Willis among those who struggle with the difference between faith and belief, but I also count him among my many, many failures as a pastor.

Sitting next to Willis in our little circle of saints is a wizened African-American man some of you may have known. His name is Joseph T. Johnson and he died seven years ago a few days short of his one-hundred and first birthday. When I was given the distinct honor of officiating at his funeral.

Joe Johnson grew up in as hardscrabble an existence as anyone could imagine. His grandparents had been slaves in East Texas, and his parents were dirt-poor sharecroppers there. You Yankees must understand that East Texas, that is more Southern than Western. It is piney-woods, cotton-raising country, and when the white folks

decimated the Caddo Indians and the Tejas tribes, those Caucasian refugees from Mississippi and Alabama brought their slave-holding, racist ways with them.

So, for Joe Johnson to walk forty miles in borrowed shoes as an eighteen-year-old sharecropper to Marshall, Texas, to attend Wiley College, an institution begun after the Civil War by white and black people of the Freedmen's Society, was quite an accomplishment of determination and desire for education. Joe graduated from Wiley in 1921, and served on its Board of Trustees for over fifty years--twenty-seven of them as chair of the board.

When I became a clergy member of the old Rock River Conference of the Methodist Church in 1967, Joe was chair of one of its most important boards--the one that raises the money and pays the apportionment to the general church--and was held in such high esteem that he led our delegation to the General Conference every four years. When he learned that I had roots in Marshall, and that I had lived a few blocks from Wiley College when I attended fifth and sixth grades in that very Southern town, he and I became fast and lasting friends. He spoke in every church I served, and Community Church, Naperville, became one of the leading supporters of Wiley College, and I served on its board of trustees for twenty-one years.

Joe Johnson stands for everything good about Christian commitment and generosity. He opened a funeral home and served as its president and director on Chicago's West Side for more than fifty years. He gave countless funerals away to people who could not afford to pay for the internment of their loved ones. He personally paid the tuition of hundreds of black students to Wiley and other colleges. He gave generously of his time, talent and money to his local congregation and to the Methodist Church. He was the most gracious, generous, God-infected man I have ever known.

Prophets are usually held without honor among their own people. Remember who uttered that aphorism first: Jesus--when he went back to his own people and tried to show them how God had called him into ministry and messiahship, when he tried to bring to reality the words of the prophet Isaiah about the Anointed One of God. Joe Johnston was a prophet, an intelligent, caring, truth-telling servant of God's Word. Joe was one who believed, one who could

easily say the words of the Apostles' Creed. But more importantly, he trusted God. I celebrate him today.

And this woman, sort of stooped with drooping cheeks and a look of profound sadness enveloping her face as well as her worn-out body: she's my mother, Hester Elizabeth Petty Winkler. She was the daughter of a preacher, the mother of two preachers, the grandmother of yet another, plus a United Methodist executive. My characterization of her is that when we moved--and we moved a lot--throughout the South, we went to the nearest Methodist Church on our first Sunday, we joined on the second Sunday and by the third week my mother was president of the local Methodist women's group--called the Women's Society of Christian Service in those days.

She was a devout Christian who suffered physical and mental anguish all her adult life. She loved her church more than anything, and when she died, we found all her speeches and notes for all those wonderful lessons she taught to so many thousands of women. If she were alive today, she would be an ordained minister. She was one of the most accomplished public speakers I have ever heard.

And she loved her pastor, whoever he was (they were only men in those days). She would support him through thick and thin, probably because she had seen her own crazy, prophetic father persecuted by so many Pastor-Parish Relations Committees, district superintendents and bishops. But when she invited her preacher to her home for afternoon tea, the preacher knew he was in for some lessons in how to run the church. She read him his pedigree and told him how to improve.

My Dad would turn off his hearing aid when the preacher mounted the pulpit--he had heard it all before--but Mom hung on every word, and although she often disagreed with the sermon, she supported her pastor and her church with unflagging devotion.

The old joke told by the workers in the former Soviet Union has theological relevance for the twenty-first century church: "We pretend to work, and our bosses pretend to pay us for working." Perhaps the temptation of clergy and laity is: "We pretend to preach, and our people pretend to listen to us," a neat arrangement in which no one is wounded and no one is healed.

But we come to affirm a very important truth: that God's economy is different from ours. We will be surprised when we get to heaven, if we have not already been alerted here on earth by a word Jesus speaks again and again: The first shall be last and the last shall be first. Some of us who think we are so righteous and good may be surprised, as in Our Lord' Parable of the Last Judgment in Matthew 25, when we realize that those who didn't put on their good faces when they put on their Sunday clothes, because they may not have had clothes good enough to get to church, are the ones blessed by God. Because they did God's will. And some of us, who make such profound professions of faith but fail to love and care for the lost and the last and the least will be sent to another place.

There is that great day coming when death will be swallowed up forever, and all the tears will be wiped away from the faces of God's people. Those faithful people who will lead the procession through the gates of heaven will be people like Abraham and Sarah, Paul of Tarsus, Willis Gibson, Joe Johnson and my Mom—people who know that trust is different from and greater than belief and assent.