

# Once Strangers

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren  
Sermon for Sunday, July 26, 2009 Ephesians 2:11-22

Twelve years ago, as Kathy and I prepared for our move to Maryland, we were going through some of the many stacks of papers, pictures and envelopes when we came across one envelope that almost got thrown in the trash. At first glance, it was just a plain, unmarked letter-size envelope that didn't seem to contain anything. But on closer inspection, we found a priceless treasure: a few blonde curls gathered up after our son's first haircut. Realizing we had almost thrown them away, we felt a sudden wave of relief, like people who have just narrowly avoided a traffic accident.

Remembering often puts us in touch with powerful emotions. Thoughts about what was, what might have been, and what even now might be if not for past events, stir up deep feelings – love, longing, grief, gratitude, honor and shame. For some, the feelings are so deep and powerful that we try to avoid them by “forgetting.” We tell ourselves that the past is past, and we must move on. We pride ourselves on living in the present moment and on being future-oriented.

This flight from the past, however, never really succeeds. The strong feelings we try to bury routinely come back to haunt us, disguised as new emotional, physical or relational problems. The past will always be a part of who we are. Spiritual, emotional and even physical health depend on our willingness to integrate past events and our feelings about them into our view of ourselves.

Frederick Buechner, Episcopal clergyman and author, whose own past contains many troubling events ( including his father's suicide) gives good advice about not avoiding memories. In *Whistling in the Dark: A Doubter's Dictionary*, he writes, “Whenever you find tears in your eyes, especially unexpected tears, it is well to pay the closest attention. They are not only telling you something about the secret of who you are, but more often than not, God is speaking to you through them of the mystery of where you have come from and is summoning you to where, if your soul is to be saved, you should go next.”

The author of the Letter to the Ephesians had the revealing, healing and guiding power of memory in mind when he called upon his readers to remember. “Remember that at one time you . . . were . . . without Christ, aliens from the commonwealth of God's chosen people, and strangers to the covenant of promise, having no hope and without God in

the world.” Remember that you were once strangers, outsiders, people who didn’t belong, people without standing, people without equal rights.

This was not an easy thing that the readers were being asked to do. As Gentiles, they were being asked to acknowledge that they were not born into the community of God’s people; the Jews came first, historically. That is something like asking a woman to remember that her husband was married before, or reminding a child that he is adopted while his sister is not. It is the kind of remembering that can make a person feel insecure or make them feel “less than” others. These are the kinds of memories we are sorely tempted to push away, to try to forget. But the scripture calls us to remember. In fact, the piling up of phrases makes the emphasis plain – remember that you were, #1 without Christ, #2 aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, #3 strangers to the covenants of promise, #4 having no hope, and #5 without God in the world. There is no sugar coating it in this text, no nostalgia, no call to remember the good old days. The call is to remember as realistically as we can that time when we just did not belong!

Think, if you will, of the last time you had that kind of experience. Think about the last time you were somewhere you very clearly did not fit in. Remember how you felt as the alien, the stranger, the outsider. Remember people looking at you and pointing and whispering to one another, trying to find out from others if they knew who you were. If you want to refresh your memory of how it all feels, I can suggest a way. Some morning, get up early and drive out into the country, the further from major highways the better. Then stop in at some little local diner for breakfast. Or if it is Sunday, stop in at your average church! Either place, you’re likely to get the experience you’re after – the experience of what it feels like to be a conspicuous outsider. It isn’t a very nice feeling. For those of us who can remember it vividly, it is not something we are anxious to experience again. It is something we might like to forget. But the Bible says, “Remember.” Why? Why remember? First, we need to remember to nurture a little humility. This applies specifically to those of us who now belong, by grace through faith, in the company of God’s people. It is good for us to remember that time when we were on the outside and how God invited us in out of sheer mercy and kindness. It is good for us to remember because it is typical for people, after they’ve been on the inside a while, to begin to act in one of two none-too-humble ways. Some start to act like they were never outsiders, but always belonged, and this (they think) makes them better than others. Others remember that they were once outsiders, but begin to act as if it wasn’t God’s mercy and kindness that brought them in but rather their own “superior” qualifications. Either way, the nature of the community of God’s people is

misunderstood. It begins to be thought of as an elite, prestigious, exclusive club rather than a simple, humble fellowship always open to whomever God may bring in.

Second, we need to remember our days as strangers and aliens in order to keep alive a sense of gratitude for what we now enjoy as members and fellow citizens. How often do we get the “So what have you done for me lately?” attitude toward God? Little things in life don’t work out the way we’d hoped, and all of a sudden we get amnesia about God’s great work of redemption, as well as countless other blessings. Forgetting the blessings of the past leads quickly to a dissatisfaction with the present. Incidentally, that is why our culture encourages us to forget the past and to focus on the present. People who are dissatisfied make the best customers. It is hard to sell things to people who are remembering and appreciating what they’ve already got.

Calling to mind a difficult past, a past of exclusion, helps us savor the present, this time in which we belong.

The third and most important reason God calls us to remember our days as strangers is to help us be the people of God we claim to be – people who, like God, are concerned for the stranger. Remembering is meant to lead to words and actions on behalf of strangers. Remembering that we were once strangers could arouse our interest in refugee resettlement. Thinking about our own time as outsiders should make us especially concerned about those who are denied access to basic services and opportunities. Remembering that we were once without hope may ignite in us a flame of love and concern for the homeless, the terminally ill poor, and people in abusive relationships.

But we can get interested in all those causes and still not get the point of remembering that we once were strangers, outsiders, without hope. We can and should be activists for today’s outsiders, crying out for justice. But we can do all that and still remain aloof, apart. And if we do, then our remembering has not had the full effect that it is meant to have.

Our purpose as God’s people is not simply to be the benefactors of those who don’t currently fit in, their patrons or substitute “parents.” Our purpose is to overcome the “we vs. them” way of thinking, to call the dividing wall an illusion, and to invite the outsiders in to stand with us in the grace of God as one people.

Let me make this pointed and practical. There are people in this area whom, while we are glad to help them get food from a food pantry or pay this month’s rent or even drive them to the doctor, many of us don’t

particularly want sitting in the pew next to us. There are barriers, but our Lord Jesus Christ died to break these barriers down.

Remember, the scripture says that you were once strangers, aliens, without hope. Remember so that the church might become a humble, open community rather than an elitist exclusive club. Remember so that you might live with an awareness of having been blessed, rather than with a grumbling “what have you done for me lately” dissatisfaction. And above all, remember so that we can be faithful servants of God, willing to invite and include other outsiders inside, to believe and belong to the one holy indivisible community of God’s redeemed people.

Remember . . .

You once were strangers.

You once didn’t fit in.

You once stood there feeling awkward and conspicuous.

And then someone who remembered said, “Hello.”

Someone invited you in.

Someone made you feel welcome.

Someone lived out their faith in the grace of God.

Now it is your turn.

Remember.

Amen.