

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

Rev. Ross Smillie

November 11, 2018 – Remembrance Day

Re-Membering Our Future

Several years ago, there was a little girl who slipped down a well on her family farm in Texas. The well hole was only about nine inches in diameter, but she slipped down about twenty feet until her head, which is the biggest part of a little girl, got stuck. She was really stuck! When her family realized what had happened, they called the fire department, and before very long, there were lots of people trying to get that little girl out. But it wasn't easy. The well was in solid rock, and in order to get to her, they had to dig a big hole beside the well, and then tunnel through to where she was, without knocking anything down on her head, and without doing anything to cause her to slip any further. It took them many, many hours to get to her, and the little girl grew very cold and very scared. So her mother started to sing to her.

This little girl loved Winnie the Pooh. She had a Winnie the Pooh videotape that she watched over and over and over. So her mother sang her the songs from that Winnie the Pooh tape, and it helped to calm her down. But the little girl was very scared and tired, so tired and scared that she felt like giving up. But the people trying to rescue her were afraid that she might die if she gave up. So her mother said, "Honey, do you remember the story of when Winnie the Pooh got stuck in the honey tree..." Remembering that story helped that little girl to calm down, and to keep from giving up. Because she knew that Winnie the Pooh got out the honey tree in the end, she regained her hope that she too would get out, however long it took. I think it is very possible that that story and those songs saved her life.

I think it is very likely that the songs and stories that we remember here in this place week after week may save your lives as well. Because stories like the ones about Jesus that we remember week after week have a way of getting inside of us and helping us when we are in trouble, helping us to get through dangerous times and giving us direction when we have important choices to make.

This is Remembrance Day, but in the church, every Sunday is remembrance day. We remember the goodness of God in creation, we remember the stories of the Hebrew people, we remember Jesus and the stories of the early church, because we believe that these are saving stories. On this day that so many celebrate as Remembrance Day, the stories we hear in church affect the kinds of things we remember. Because we remember that Jesus taught us to love our enemies, we remember not just the Canadians who died, and not just our allies, but we remember the Germans and Japanese and Italians. Because we remember that Jesus told us to do good to those who treat us badly, we remember that war is not the way to end war. We remember that peace in Europe and the Pacific came about not just because the Nazis and Imperial Japan were defeated, but because after the war, the Allies forgave their enemies and helped to rebuild their countries. Those who were once enemies became our closest allies. Abraham Lincoln once said that there is only one way to destroy an enemy and that is to turn your enemy into your friend. These are all things that we should remember on this particular day.

Do you know what amphibians are? Animals like frogs and salamanders that can live both on water and in land. Amphibians spend a lot of time in the water, but they can also get out on the bank and look around. Reinhold Niebuhr, who also wrote the Serenity Prayer, once compared human beings to amphibians. We are like amphibians, he said, because we live in the river of time, but we can remember the past and we can look forward to the future. When we remember and when we look forward we are like those amphibians that are crawling out on the bank and looking around. We aren't confined to the river of time; we are free. Remembering and looking forward gives us a tremendous freedom to choose a new future. That is why I titled this sermon "Re-remembering our future."

There are some cultures in which war is considered glorious, in which death in battle is the greatest honour that anyone can achieve. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Germany was that kind of culture, and so was England. And when Britain declared war on Germany in 1914, the members of the British House of Commons cheered. They cheered because they thought war was glorious. But they had not counted on the terrible destructiveness of modern warfare and after four brutal years of what came to be called the Great War, no one was cheering any more. When the armistice was signed almost exactly 100 years ago, at eleven

o'clock on November 11, 1918, people around the world resolved to remember, so that no generation would ever again have to suffer the wounds of war.

Today, we dream of a world without war, but in a world where people of different races, religions, cultures, nationalities and economic classes come constantly into contact, conflict is inevitable, and wherever there are conflicts, there is the possibility of those conflicts becoming violent. At one level the prophetic hope of Isaiah for a world in which carnivores (like wolves, leopards and lions) will live at peace with herbivores (like sheep, goats and cattle) seems like an idealistic dream. Isaiah uses animals as symbols for natural enemies, and this passage that we heard read is a poetic longing for a day when even the most entrenched enemies will find a way to live together in trust. This passage is very much like John Lennon's song "Imagine" and Pete Seeger's "Last Night I had the Strangest Dream." Such songs and dreams keep the hope of non-violent conflict resolution alive. Today, war is so destructive that we simply have to resolve our conflicts in some other way. Remembering that might save lives, many, many lives.

But in a world of constant conflict, it is not enough to hate war. We also need to remember that there can be no peace without forgiveness. After the First World War, the victorious allies did not forgive. Instead they punished Germany by expecting Germany to repay the cost of the war. That destroyed Germany's economy and paved the way for the rise of the Nazis and another world war. Fortunately, when the Second World War ended, the victorious allies had learned that lesson, forgave Germany and Japan and poured money and resources into rebuilding those shattered countries. As a result, today Germany and Japan are among our most loyal allies. Abraham Lincoln once said that the best way to destroy an enemy is to make him a friend. Remembering that there can be no peace without forgiveness might save lives, many, many lives.

In a world of constant conflict, we need also to remember that there can be no peace without justice, without fairness, without ways of fairly addressing the legitimate concerns of conflicting groups. Isaiah's vision of peace starts with the hope for a fair leader, who will be a good judge, who can see with the eyes of the Spirit what will make for peace. Those who would learn the lessons of war must be staunch advocates of justice, within and between nations. There can be no peace when some live in luxury while others starve. There can be no peace when the lives of refugees and the poor matter less than the rest of us. Whenever there is

injustice there will be those who use desperate means to try to make change. A peace without justice is a terribly unstable peace. Remembering that might save lives, many, many lives.

In the reading from Matthew, Jesus gave his blessing to peacemakers, but also to those who hunger and thirst for justice. Sometimes the desire for peace may seem to be in conflict with the need for justice. When a powerful group brutally attacks defenseless people, should we be peacemakers, or should we hunger and thirst for justice? In reality, it is a false choice. We must be both. What Jesus held together, we must not separate. Peacemakers cannot be advocates of a false peace in which injustice and genocide is allowed to go unopposed. On the other hand, the hunger for justice must be satisfied in as non-violent a way as possible. The pursuit of justice and the pursuit of peace cannot be separated. Remembering that might save lives, many, many lives.

Remembrance Day is a day to remember the times of war, so that we may learn the lessons of peace. Peace, forgiveness and justice are not easy. They are constantly under threat. They must be defended, sometimes at great cost.

The poem “In Flanders’ Fields,” which we heard earlier, contains the line, “take up our quarrel with the foe.” I wonder sometimes who that foe is, with whom we are supposed to take up the quarrel. Apparently Dr. John McRae, the author of that poem, told his chaplain that he did not think of the foe as the German soldiers across the battlefield, but as the spirit of war itself. Who is the foe against which we are to take up the quarrel? War itself, hatred and violence, the thirst for vengeance, injustice in all its forms – these are the seeds of war against which we are to take up the quarrel. To repeat this poem is to resolve once more to hold high the torch in the struggle for peace, for forgiveness and for justice, so that those who died defending them will rest in peace, wherever they lie.

Remembering can open a new future. The time may come to us when, like those we remember today, we will have to give our lives for a worthy cause. If so, we can trust in the good news of the resurrection, that God is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him they are all alive. This hope and faith can allow us to remember with hope, and to face the future with courage and faith. Amen.