

*“Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.*

*And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.*

*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.*

*And remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”*

It’s been a couple of weeks since I’ve preached a sermon, so I need to begin with a story. Three weeks ago I was at a conference I often attend. There were a number of folks there, pastors who I knew but who I hadn’t seen for a long time. I ended up having a wonderful conversation with Doug, who is now ready to announce his retirement, effective later this Fall. This, of course, has inspired plenty of conversations in the congregation he serves, not the least of which are questions about what he’s planning to do in his retirement. At one of these questions, without having really worked through how he planned to answer it, he blurted out something he hadn’t been consciously thinking, but must have been welling up from within.

“I plan to remember who I am” is what he said. This sounded well enough coming out of his mouth, but then he needed to sit back and consider what it really meant.

Upon further reflection with our small breakfast table group, he said that ‘remembering who he is’, is made of a few things. For starters ... a family identity, a personal identity, and a community identity. [Parenthetically, it’s not a coincidence that he gave a three-point outline for this. After 35 years in the pulpit, some old habits are hard to break.] He had just sent off a DNA sample to Ancestry.com to begin to find out more about his family heritage, Dutch immigrants who settled in Michigan in the mid 1800’s. He was very curious to know what stones might be uncovered in this research. I’m waiting to hear what he finds out soon.

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So on this Memorial Day Sunday, it’s worth our while to look back a bit at the stories and sources of our identity; who we are, as God’s children, together.

The question is more than just about our past, it also includes the way we understand ourselves in the here and now, and it all comes together in the way we live today.

What I mean by this is encapsulated in a wonderful exchange that a friend of mine (and maybe of yours, too) - shared in an off the cuff Facebook post not long ago.

You can read it as our Preparation for Worship on the bulletin cover this morning.

Me: “I just want to make an impact in this world. I don’t want to do anything that’s trivial.”

Counselor: “This life will always include both the trivial and meaningful. Sometimes you won’t even be able to tell the difference.”

That’s both a humbling and a comforting word, isn’t it? It fits in life in lots of places. Sometimes we just don’t know what impact the way we respond to events in our lives will have on others, and how they will affect our own living, too.

Now, not to go on too long about this, but like my friend Doug, (though I’m not really thinking about retirement at all) - of late I’ve been caught up with family genealogy. My trips to seeing my Mom, now in her 90’s, has coincided in meeting other family members I never knew I had, specifically- my great grandfather’s brothers’ great-granddaughters. (How do you like that?) I never knew this part of my family even existed and have recently found a ‘missing link’ in my family tree that I’ve been trying to find for years. I knew that my great-grandfather emigrated from Ireland in 1872- I’ve seen paperwork for that. He came on the ship “Anglia,” a ship similar to the one on the bulletin cover today, but I never knew his hometown or why he journeyed over here, or anything more about his family.



So through a series of odd, unexpected, unpredictable circumstances I’ve come to find out that after his father died in 1872, in Omagh, County Tyrone, my great-grandfather decided to venture over here, leaving behind his mother, younger brother and at least two sisters. And that’s just the beginning of the story, of course.

So as I’ve shared this with family and friends (news I never knew), reactions have been varied. The most common remark (interestingly enough) has been this one: “well, that’s just what they did back then...”

Hmmmmmm... that has made me think.

I've let that sink in over a few weeks' time and have wondered about that. How would you like to pack up all your necessary belongings in one carry-all, spend a few weeks' time aboard a trans-Atlantic steamer and disembark in a whole new country, with no connections; no family or friends- only yourself to rely on?

I'm not so sure if "That's just what they did back then" is the best response we can find.

What my ancestor did, and so did yours- one way or another, was a far more courageous act than we often acknowledge; with more uncertainty, adventure, chance, grit and determination than we can likely begin to fathom now.

The same phenomenon is surely present in immigrant communities today, but it is hidden, or at least dismissed from the way many of us see life going on around us. And that's sad. This is our common story to share as Americans.

If I were to meet my great-grandfather face to face, the first question I'd ask is 'You did what? Why?' I'd love to hear his story- just as I'm sure you'd love to hear the stories about those who came here before you.

What for one person is normal, unexceptional, just what needed doing- becomes in retrospect for others a monumental accomplishment, a life-defining moment.

This is what our two scripture lessons point to, briefly, this morning. The two stories share a similar theme of resilience; of a stick-to-it-iveness that goes beyond the ordinary and expected, which results in transformed lives for those who follow thereafter. They are statements of embodied faith, larger than life stories that take on life in scripture, and in our retelling this morning.

In the Genesis account, this is the very end of the saga of the first book of the Bible. Joseph, Abraham's last and most favored son, given the coat of many colors, (to the envy and anger of all his brothers), had been thrown into a pit and sold off as a slave.

As the epic account winds its way, chapter after chapter, Joseph rises to power in the court of Egypt, against all odds but according to the talent and charm with which he was born.

After a drought in the land of Canaan drives his brothers to seek food in Egypt, the tables are completely turned. They need to seek life from him, the very one they handed over to death. Worried that Joseph might still hold a well-deserved grudge against them, and that he might deny them food, they ask for food, not on their own behalf, but invoking the name of their father.

Joseph's response is one of the most 'quotable quotes' of the Bible- a model for gracious behavior, far above our normal way of thinking about and doing things. "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good."

I have to think that those who had knowledge of Joseph's entire life story up to this point, of what his brothers had done to him and how he had been left for dead, would assume that Joseph would be at most indifferent to them. Their response to Joseph would most likely be, "...and you did what? Why?"

That he was open and gracious, that he bore absolutely no grudge, but was willing to help out generously speaks volumes about the grace of God and the goodness that people can embody. This brief verse inserted at the end of a very long saga is a message for the ages; a one-line summary of the nature of the goodness Joseph embodied, shared, and passed on to others long after him.

Our New Testament Lesson is much shorter, and likely better known, though it still includes an important and often overlooked twist. It's the last scene in Matthew's gospel and the final words Jesus' shares in any gospel account. Jesus has been raised from the dead and returns to direct the disciples to the place from which he will ascend to heaven. They show up, but apparently with some reservations.... I can never read this passage without the words "but some doubted" jumping out at me.

What should be troubling words become words of assurance.

Jesus knows these men and is fully aware that they are by no means perfect.

They have betrayed him once, they turned away when they could have stayed by his side. But that does not deter Jesus from both blessing them one final time and promising his presence to be with them from then on, and into forever, 'even to the end of the age.' The promise is absolute and unending.

Knowing the questionable nature of the disciples' faithfulness, you might rightly want to ask Jesus, just before his ascension... "Jesus — you did, what? Why?"

What Jesus gives with this promise is an assurance that undergirds us, supports us, encourages and comforts us.

It is a promise of presence that we can rely on, no matter what. It is a promise that we can depend on when times are tough.

On this Memorial Day weekend, these words of Jesus constitute a promise that countless men and women in uniform have counted on for generations. This is an unbreakable promise, because Jesus had made it with us- even without our asking; it is a gift without a return label. It's ours, to have and hold, to use and share. And it is a gift for us all, to recognize in all the varied times of our lives that we have done something important, whether it seems important at the time or not.

Now honestly, because I've been with you for 14 years now, I know that each of you has a story – whether it is one of courage, determination, openness, welcome, caring, fortitude, faith, generosity, hope or love – of hardships carried with grace, of generosity borne out of blessings, of joys delivered out of thankfulness, of persistent faithfulness emerging out a simple love to serve; each of you has a story to be shared, told and retold. You may think your story is trivial, but it is not. You might not be able to tell the difference between what you think is trivial and important, but that is not for us to take on.

Sometimes the most remarkable faithfulness has to do with the little things in life, even more than with the profound and overly dramatic.

Day to day faithfulness requires more courage and stamina than is given credit; it nourishes us and equips us for those times when we need to summon some extra support from the Holy Spirit.

So, on this morning before Memorial Day, on this Trinity Sunday, we acknowledge, give thanks and praise God our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer for all the ways we've been upheld in life, supported by God's love and given the grace to share the goodness that we can; all in Jesus' name. Amen.