

The Road That Leads from Pentecost: Preaching through the Summer

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Like the Chicago Cubs, the Christian liturgical year often looks better on paper than it does in practice. The idea of the church year, of course, is that Christians are to mark and shape time according to its festivals and seasons. Sometimes this happens; sometimes it doesn't. When we count the days until Christmas, keep the disciplines of Lent, or gather to sing the alleluias at an Easter sunrise service, we come closest, perhaps, to observing the sacred movement of time embodied in the church's calendar. However, other calendars than the church's exist, and there are many occasions when these rival ways of organizing time gain the upper hand, expressing more adequately how it is that we truly number our days. Epiphany study groups are rare on Super Bowl Sunday, for instance.

Take the summer as another case in point. In the liturgical scheme of things, the interim between the Day of Pentecost and the festival of Christ the King is intended to be an electric period of anticipation during which the church celebrates its pentecostal life-style as a harbinger of the coming triumph of God. It is the time, to borrow Moltmann's phrase, of "the church in the power of the Spirit." At Pentecost the church celebrates the gift of the Spirit, and "the presence of the Holy Spirit," writes Moltmann, "is to be understood as the earnest and beginning of the new creation of all things in the kingdom of God . . . Christianity is not yet the new creation, but it is the working of the Spirit of the new creation."¹ In a doctrinal sense, this marching in the Spirit down the pilgrim road toward the yet-to-come is what preaching in the summer months, those many Sundays "after Pentecost," is all about.

The problem, though, is that around most parishes, the summer is far from an electric period of anticipation. The plugs are pulled on many programs, the pace of activities relaxes, and the life of the congregation adjusts to the languid rhythm of leisure and vacations. Summer preaching, far from being a taut cord drawn between Pentecost and Christ the King, is more often a lazy stream meandering from Pentecost to Back-to-School.

As a consequence, the summer can be a period of what may be called "maintenance preaching." The pulpit marks time and the newsletter is filled with anxious warnings ("Don't take a vacation from God" . . . "Remember, the budget needs of the church never leave home."). Instead of breathing in the wild wind of the Spirit, the church goes on a respirator until the fall comes to resuscitate it.

I am exaggerating, to be sure, but I do so in order to suggest some other possibilities for summer preaching. One of these has already been discovered by many ministers, who know that the summer, a time when the church

calendar is largely free from special campaigns, emphases, pageants, and the like, can be the ideal time for the development of a sermon series. Those who use the lectionary and who most often pick up the gospel lessons during the Christmas and Easter cycles, will find that opportunities are present to examine large chunks of Old Testament and epistolary material. This summer, the lectionary includes fairly continuous readings from II Samuel, II Corinthians, Ephesians, James, and Hebrews.

Another summer preaching possibility, perhaps a bit more venturesome one, involves exploring the connections and the gaps between what the church's calendar wants us to talk about and what the culture's calendar wants us to celebrate. What I mean by this is to take the fact seriously that, while the makers of liturgical resources are insisting that we are traveling the road from Pentecost through All Saints to Christ the King, most of us are bouncing our way from Memorial Day through the Fourth of July and Labor Day to the World Series. To be sure, many preachers have their holiday weekend sermons on "Christian Citizenship" and "Christian Vocation," but what if we were to look through the lens of Pentecost at the whole rhythm and shape of the summer as our people actually live it?

The summer months include many different activities and events, all with multiple meanings, but as a start we can say that in the summer, we do at least two things more fervently than at any other time of the year: we *play* and we *memorialize*. Vacations are but the most intense form of the themes of recreation and leisure which prevail throughout the summer, and the summer typically includes several occasions for national, family, and group remembering: Memorial Day, July the Fourth, homecomings, reunions, and so on. *That* we do these things and *the ways* in which we do them, are no small indicators of what we consider to be important about our life together. How do these impulses look when they are refracted through the prisms of Pentecost and the concept of the church as the community of the Holy Spirit?

The Playground of Abandon

In the window of one of the travel agencies in the town where I live is an alluring vacation poster. In a collage of photos, the poster depicts several couples enjoying the dickens out of themselves on vacation. There is one couple frolicking in the turquoise waters of some island paradise. Another couple is sharing cocktails on the deck of a cruise ship as the sun slips from a purple and orange sky into the sea. Yet another couple, designer sunglasses in place, snuggles together as they glide on a ski lift over still-snowy ridges toward an alpine crest. The young men and women in each of these pictures are all attractive, and clearly attracted to each other in a lusty and carefree sort of way. I am not quite sure how the photographers accomplished it, but they have managed to capture in still photos the underlying message that these people are not alone—after all, they have each other—but that their relationships are unencumbered by any of the messy entanglements which tend to accompany human commitment. If these people have taken shifts in the night to tend to a sick child, are currently trying to decide how to provide for an infirmed parent,

or are attempting to hold a marriage together through sacrifice and compromise, it does not show. At the top of the poster, in bold blue letters, is a single word: *Escape*.

It is an interesting notion, really, that we would think of our leisure as "escape," that the movies we favor in the summer, the adventure novels we read on the beach, are often called "escapist." Much of this is innocent, of course. We really do not escape forever, nor do we want to do so, but there is a question here which should be taken seriously: When we think about the most appealing way to use the time which is utterly ours to burn, why is it the word which seems most attractive to us is "escape"?

Foremost among those things we would like to escape, of course, is work. What is leisure, if it is not an escape from the toil of our labor? Every worker needs a break now and then, but there is a sadder and deeper sense in which many folk find little pleasure whatsoever in their work and look for whatever joy life has to offer in those moments of escape from work and everyday commitments. We derive income from work, but we look to nights, weekends, and vacations for our pleasure. We even have a "leisure industry" catering to our off-duty desires, but it does not really satisfy us either. Indeed, the growth of that industry is predicated upon *not* satisfying us, but dangling before us the prospect that one more video tape, beach trip, or dirt bike will finally have us sighing, "Hey, it doesn't get any better than this." One is reminded of the recent *New Yorker* cartoon depicting a middle-aged couple sitting pool-side at a posh resort. Each is reading a magazine, and the man is saying to the woman, "Look, here is a picture of a couple doing what we're doing. But they seem to be enjoying it more than we are."

Wendell Berry was talking in church the other day about this loss of pleasure in our work. Berry is a farmer in Henry County, Kentucky. He is also a poet and essayist of some note, but it is as a farmer that he wishes most of all to be known, and he was preaching the morning sermon at the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine in New York City. Berry *looked* like a farmer as he stood there in the pulpit. He is tall and rangy, has a farmer's tan, and he was wearing a simple brown suit and newly polished Sunday shoes. He spoke quietly, a bit haltingly, but firmly about the difference between the joyless work most people in our society feel condemned to perform and the promise of genuine pleasure in human work when it is viewed in the light of, and as a part of, God's own work of creating and sustaining the world.

To make his point clear, he contrasted the typical work conditions of the high-tech marketplace with the labor he knows best: the Kentucky tobacco harvest. He did not claim that everything about the tobacco harvest is good or pleasurable. To the contrary, the harvest calls for long hours, is physically demanding, must be done so quickly that it seems almost like an emergency, and involves a crop with a questionable moral basis. The irony of the tobacco harvest, however, is that even though it is exactly the sort of work which most people would never willingly choose and would not believe to be desirable labor, it is nonetheless immensely satisfying and, in its own way, pleasurable.

Because the harvest must be performed with haste, every able-bodied man and woman is needed in the fields. The whole community—landowners and

field workers, men and women—is present and engaged in work toward a common goal. Moreover, tobacco harvesting is still largely done by hand rather than machine, which means there are the people, the time, and the quiet necessary for plenty of conversation. This talk, he said, is about everything under the sun, but much of it has to do with stories and memories about people who once worked the harvest, but who have since died. In addition, since all of the adults are busy working the fields, the children are brought to the barn to play. Breaks in the work form opportunities to spend a few minutes playing with the children.

Having described all this, Berry then said an odd thing. “The saddest thing about modern technological labor,” he said, “is that *it cuts us off from children and from the dead.*” A mysterious statement, to be sure, but part of what he was pointing to was the fact that when work is done in the presence of children, we are reminded that we are not working only for ourselves, or for what we can squeeze out of the present moment. When there are children playing in the barns where we store the fruits of our labor, we see that we are working for others and toward the future. A child playing on a cruise missile assembly line would clarify more about that kind of labor than would a hundred speeches.

To remember the dead when we work, to tell stories of those who have done this work before us, places us in an even larger communion. To remember the dead as we work frees us from the illusion of our indispensability. We have taken the place of others; others will soon take our place; the work goes on. To know that others have faithfully done this work before us lets us know that the work is important. Human beings have needed and done this work before; they need it now. As workers, we are not indispensable, but we are significant because we pour out our energies into the common good, and when we are gone, stories about us will be fondly added to the repertoire.

In sum, Berry was saying that work gives us pleasure when it takes place within a community which has a treasured past and a hopeful future and when it truly engages our energies in a task which that community values. This kind of labor has as its proper rhythm not work and *escape*, but work and *rest*. In contrast to this, the recent article in a computer magazine, depicting the “workplace of the future”—a home computer terminal where a person sits, all alone, manipulating bits of electronic data for personal gain—makes for dreary reading and gives motivation to the impulse to escape.

I live in a house owned by the school where I teach, and not long ago a young electrician was sent to our home to install a smoke alarm. The house is old, built before the time of household electrification, and the man was having a difficult time finding a place in the ancient walls to drop the necessary wiring. Every time he thought that he had cracked the venerable secrets of the house, a hidden beam or an out-of-square joist would block his path. Every hour or so he would knock on my study door to report the latest failure, the newest frustration. “This one’s a toughie,” he said, “but I’m going to get it.”

At some point I began to wonder why I was getting these progress reports. All I really cared about was the smoke alarm, the final product. How he finally conquered the problem and got it into place was his problem, not mine. Finally

it dawned on me, though, that he wanted me to care—or better, assumed that I *did* care—about his labor. He was operating with the view that both of us wanted that smoke alarm in place, and furthermore the human sweat and ingenuity involved in doing it also mattered to us both. In his own way, he refused to let me objectify him as a provider of goods and to objectify myself as a consumer. We were in this one together. His labor is in great measure his life, just as my labor is in great measure my life, and his periodic reports were a way of gathering me into his work. He was not interrupting my privacy; he was giving me a gift, and when I finally acquired the discernment to listen to him with genuine interest, I learned how to receive it and to give him one in return.

In this light, it is interesting to explore the ending of the Pentecost story in Acts 2. What we have here is a portrait of the newly formed Christian community “together” and “with all things in common.” The debate over whether or not these people were practicing an early and ill-fated form of communism is interesting historically, but almost entirely beside the point. The purpose here is to provide a glimpse of what human community looks like lived in the power of the Spirit. It is “The Peaceable Kingdom” rendered in terms of human society. It is the communion of the saints, the “harvest barn” of the kingdom, where children are at play (“. . . for the promise is to you and to your children . . .”) and even the dead are made alive. People release their grasp on possessions in order to meet human need. Daily life is organized around the poles of community worship and table fellowship, and each day more and more chairs are brought to the dinner table as “the Lord added to their number.” Everyone speaks with favor of these people.

Some have questioned whether even these infant Christians ever lived so idyllically, but that is the wrong question. This is no sociologist’s scientific account of early Christian society; this is a theologian’s picture of the life of the community of the Holy Spirit. Regardless of whether or not any Christian group has ever fully been there, this is a vision of where all genuinely human society is finally going.

To be sure, there is nothing said explicitly here about either leisure or work, but look at the playfulness in this picture. Like children at the end of a game of *Monopoly*, freely tossing hotels and money with abandon onto the board, these people understand that possessions are not nearly so real and important as the friends around the table. They eat together “with glad and generous hearts” which tells us there is joyous laughter in their eating and in their rest. Moreover, all that makes our labor joyless and worthy of escape has disappeared. No one is fearfully conserving wealth. No one is stepping on anybody else’s back in order to advance and have a surer grip on who he is by reading the title on his door. No one is alone.

In a way, the people in this community have but one vocation, with many forms: praising God. And they have but one occupation, also with many forms: baking bread for the nourishment of all.

We cannot entirely live this way, of course. The assembly lines still run, and if our families are to be fed and sheltered, we must operate the drill press and file the reports and enter the data and yearn for a couple of weeks a year of escape. We do not yet live in the “Peaceable Kingdom.” But we do live in

the era of the Spirit. "Christianity," writes Moltmann, "is not yet the new creation, but it is the working of the Spirit of the new creation." The Spirit creates free spaces in our otherwise imprisoned lives. Some have the freedom to act powerfully and responsibly to change the prevailing order. Others have the freedom only to pray for the world to come. But all in Christ have the freedom to envision the coming kingdom and to recognize its coming. In the words of theologian Arthur McGill:

There is no point in leveling an attack against selfishness, or in exhorting people to get busy and help others . . . Whether people serve themselves or serve others is not in their power to choose. This is decided wholly in terms of the kind of world in which they think they live, in terms of the kind of power they see ruling the roost. The issue lies at the level of the god they worship and not in the kind of person they may want to be. In New Testament terms, they live or die according to the king that holds them and the kingdom to which they belong.²

We live or die—and work or play—according to the king who holds us and the kingdom to which we belong. When the king who holds us is self, God knows why we need to plot our escape. When the King who holds us is God, put the loaves in the oven and bake them with care. Then take your place of rest at the Table of joy.

A Case of Amnesia

The summer is also a time for a special kind of remembering. New Year's Eve evokes nostalgia, of course, with the inevitable media reprise of the "events of the year past" and the wistful playing of "Auld Lang Syne" in the final seconds of the dying year. Summer remembering, however, is of a less rueful, more warmly celebrative sort. New Year's Eve is a mournful clarinet; summer remembering is a thumping bass drum as flag-bearing old warriors march their way down the street in a Memorial Day parade. New Year's Eve is a glass of champagne lifted high lest "old acquaintance be forgot and never brought to mind." Summer remembering is lemonade and iced tea; tables laden with barbecue, ham, chicken, and freshly churned ice cream; the laughter of playing children; and cries of "Why, I used to bounce you on my knee, but now look at you, all grown up!" at church homecomings and family reunions. In the summer we attempt to remember the formative events—the wars, the marriages and births, the groundbreakings—by which we constitute the turning points in the narrative of our public and personal lives. What does it mean that we remember these things and that other equally striking moments are stricken from our memory?

Human memory is a wonderful and strange phenomenon. Early one morning I stepped out my front door in the predawn darkness to retrieve the morning paper. A delicate snow had fallen during the night, and my bedroom slipper made a crunching sound as it broke through the frozen surface. It was that sound that did it, I think, taking me in an instant to a long-forgotten moment a quarter of a century ago. A high school girlfriend and I had gone out to walk

one morning after a rare Georgia snowfall. We were eager to be free of the house and parental scrutiny, but her mother had caused a slight though irritating delay in our liberation by insisting over protest that she put on her rubber boots before venturing out. When we finally escaped, glad to be together and alone, we wandered in the quiet wonder of woods fresh with snow. As we passed a snowdrift, she committed a small act of defiance against maternal protection by thrusting her boot-clad foot deep into its wetness. There was a crunch as her boot broke the surface—the same sound that my older and slippered foot now made in a snowfall of many years later—followed by her laughter as snow filled her boot. I had not thought of that experience again since it happened, twenty-five years ago, but there it was, hidden in some silent place in my memory, waiting for a simple sound to trigger its release.

There are many such moments in the memories of each of us. Like canisters of film in some nearly forgotten archive, they wait for some stray sound or scent or whisper to project them once again on the screen of consciousness. If that is all that memory does, however, serving up randomly provoked bits and pieces of experiences gone by, life would be maddeningly episodic. Memory, in fact, does more—much more—than this. Memory is no mere archivist; memory is a narrator, selecting a set of primary scenes, leaving others on the cutting floor, and splicing them into a coherent drama. To a great degree, then, our personal and group sense of identity is a function of memory. What we are doing, loving, and hoping for at the moment is but the latest scene in an ongoing narrative woven from fragments in and by our memories.

What this means, of course, is the exhilarating and frightening truth that identity is not a given, but an act of creation. The blips and bursts of our past can potentially be arranged in many different patterns; there are many and varied possible plots which memory can construct for the “story of our life.” People sometimes speak of trying to “find themselves,” when the truth of the matter is that we are all attempting to “create our-selves.” As clinical neurologist Oliver Sacks put it in his *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*:

[T]o be ourselves we must *have* ourselves—possess, if need be re-possess, our life stories. We must “recollect” ourselves, recollect the inner drama, the narrative of ourselves. A man [*sic*] *needs* such a narrative, a continuous inner narrative, to maintain his identity, his self.³

Because our memories are given this task of forming the self, amnesia, the loss of memory, becomes both a dreadful and an attractive possibility. Amnesia is dreadful because the loss of memory is the loss of self. Ironically, amnesia is attractive for precisely the same reason. When we are soulfully dissatisfied with ourselves, it is tempting to contemplate the obliteration of the restless self in favor of life as a series of disconnected sensual experiences. In *Lost in the Cosmos*, Walker Percy notes that, “In all soap operas and in many films and novels, a leading character will sooner or later develop amnesia . . . He [or she] finds himself in a strange place, having forgotten his old place, his family, friends, business.”⁴ Percy hints that there is a subtle appeal for the reader or viewer, a vicarious rush of freedom, contained in this sudden loss of the dreary former self, and he proposes the following “thought experiment” as a test:

Test your response to vicarious loss of self by imagining amnesia raised to the highest power. Imagine a soap opera in which a character awakens every morning with amnesia, in a strange house with a strange attractive man (or woman), welcomed by the stranger, looking out a strange window with a strange view, having forgotten the past each morning and starting life afresh, seeing the window, the view, himself, herself, in the mirror afresh and for the first time. Does this prospect intrigue you? If it does, what does this say about your non-amnesic self?⁵

To respond to Percy's question, what it says, I suppose, is that we do not really like the selves we have spun for *ourselves*. Entrusted with the task of generating identity, our memories have been faulty or, to put it theologically, sinful. We have constructed narratives for ourselves as persons and as a society, but we sense that these narratives are fragile and imperiled on every side because they are not completely true. We have at best only half-remembered, and we have the vague feeling that we have been making all this up. We take our July the Fourth Day floats down Main Street, but not down the Bowery or past the foreclosed farm, because then we would have to face a piece of memory we have tried to erase. The family album passed around at the reunion contains no embarrassing snapshots of the inevitable skeletons which inhabit every family's closets.

"If my memory serves me well," we sometimes begin a reminiscence, but, truthfully, our memories rarely *serve* us well. They most often create life stories we can live *with*, rather than ones we can genuinely live *by*. As Craig Dykstra states it in his essay "Memory and the Truth":

We can barely live without memory. Without a narrative that sustains us, the world—and we ourselves—are virtually phantom. But the issue is not just whether one has a narrative or not. The issue is whether we have one that is true and genuine, one that can sustain us in reality, one that, having been given it and having committed it to memory, frees us from desperately having to make one up.⁶

Dykstra recounts Oliver Sacks's observations about a patient named Jimmie, a former sailor whose amnesia had effaced all memory after 1945. Jimmie, a resident of a nursing home, had no recent memory and, thus, no means for manufacturing a coherent self. Sacks asked the Sisters at the home whether Jimmie had "lost his soul," only to find the nuns outraged by his question. "Watch Jimmie in chapel," they insisted, "and judge for yourself."

I did, and I was moved, profoundly moved and impressed, because I saw here an intensity and steadiness of attention and concentration that I had never seen before in him or conceived him capable of. I watched him kneel and take the Sacrament on his tongue, and could not doubt the fullness and totality of Communion, the perfect alignment of his spirit with the spirit of the Mass . . . He was wholly held, absorbed, by a feeling. There was no forgetting . . . for he was no longer at the mercy of a faulty and fallible mechanism—that of meaningless sequences and memory traces—but was absorbed in an act, an act of his whole being . . .

“Here,” says Dykstra, “a person incapable of sustaining a narrative in memory somehow allows himself to be held by a meaning he could not make.”⁷

To be held by a meaning we cannot make—this is the grace which frees us from the half-truths and distorted narratives which are the products of our own scheming. And this is finally the promise of the gospel, and the work of the Spirit. “The Counselor, the Holy Spirit,” Jesus said, “whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (John 14:26). To be filled by the Spirit is not to glow with inner spiritual warmth, but to be given the gift of true memory. It is no coincidence that Peter, in the power of the Spirit, standing up to preach that first Pentecost, addressed his congregation by retelling *their* story, but this time in a version true and sure. It was the familiar story, a narrative about prophets like Joel and kings like David, but this time there were no parts omitted, no memories selectively erased, for it was also the story of Jesus of Nazareth, a man through whom God did wonders and gave signs, “*as you yourselves know.*” They *knew* this, but they had not *remembered* it. They knew this, but they had consigned it to the archives, left it on the cutting room floor, refused to allow this scene to shape the narrative of self and national identity.

But now, over against all partial stories, over against all half-remembered narratives which justify the broken self, fragment human community, and distort reality, they—and all others since—are offered, as a gift, to be held by a meaning we cannot make and even seek to destroy, but which comes to redeem us: “God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified . . . Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:36, 38).

The community of faith created by this promise broke bread in their homes and “partook of food with glad and generous hearts.” As they did, surely one of them told the story of who they were and how they came to be, taking care to speak the Spirit’s line . . . “This do in remembrance of me.”

NOTES

¹ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), pp. 191, 196.

² Arthur C. McGill, *Suffering: A Test of Theological Method* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), pp. 91-2.

³ Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, as quoted in Craig Dykstra, “Memory and Truth,” *Theology Today* (Vol. XLIV, No. 2), p. 160.

⁴ Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1983), p. 17.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁶ Dykstra, p. 163.

⁷ Dykstra, p. 162.