

Embodied Memory

Acts 5:27-32, Revelation 1:4-8, John 20:19-31

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It is currently fashionable to be a victim. In order to have status today, it seems we must have in our life some peculiar misfortune that we can claim should give us special consideration. It is also currently fashionable to reject claims of victimization. That at least seems to be the case in any reading of our current politics. White middle-class males—people like me—it seems have had it with the whiners. We've worked hard, done well enough, and we will be damned if we want to apologize for it. We do not mean to be unfeeling. In fact, we are sorry that certain people have suffered past wrongs, but we did not perpetrate those wrongs, and we see no reason that we should be held accountable.

For example, here in the South, we know that slavery certainly existed, and racism was a terrible reality that is still, unfortunately, too much with us. Look around—we are not an all white church by accident. Yet we did not own slaves; certainly my people did not own slaves. We were poor whites, and we suffered as much as African-Americans. Moreover, while racism is still certainly present, we do not think ourselves to be racist, so we refuse to believe we have anything for which we should apologize and/or have our own lives changed in order to correct.

Current claims about victimization make it difficult to remember the Holocaust, as we are asked to do on the Sunday after Easter, for to remember the destruction of the Jews can too easily be seen as just another victim's strategy to make us feel guilty. Moreover, it seems an odd day to be asked to remember the Holocaust since it seems nothing distances us more from the Jews than the resurrection—a view I hope to counter by the end of this sermon by reminding us that nothing is more Jewish than Jesus' bodily resurrection.

However, at least one of the reasons we have to remember the Holocaust is that fifty years ago, on April 9 to be exact, the great theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was hanged by the Nazis for his resistance to Hitler. We rightly celebrate Bonhoeffer's life, but such a celebration can tempt us to avoid the issue of Christian complicity with the Holocaust. That some Christians resisted the destruction of European Jewry does not mean that we can forget the centuries of Christian persecution of the Jews that led to the horrible destruction of Auschwitz and Belsen.

But, just as many of us react against some of the current rhetoric of victimization, we also react against attempts to make us remember the Holocaust. After all, we American Christians did not perpetrate the Holocaust. We were and are a tolerant society. We fought to end the Holocaust. Is not the Holocaust like slavery?—that is, a terrible thing, but not really part of our lives. Why should we be asked to remember such events? Those that would force such remembering assume wrongly that such remembrance will prevent the recurrence of anti-Semitism or racism.

Still we Christians must remember the Holocaust. We have no choice. We must also remember slavery, though remembering slavery is different from remembering the Holocaust. Yet I hope to suggest that if we get straight what it means to remember

the Holocaust we will better know how to remember slavery.

What is crucial about our remembering the Holocaust is, of course, the special relationship to Judaism that we have as Christians. For our Christ, the Jesus we worship, was and is the savior of Israel. For example, notice in the text from Acts for today, when Peter and some of the other followers of Jesus were brought before the high priest of the temple in Jerusalem, the high priest notes they had prohibited Peter and the apostles from teaching in Jesus' name, assuming that in so teaching they were trying to blame the priests for Jesus' death—they are the enemies of victimization in their day. Peter responds, like the prophets had responded, when God requires that God's apostles speak, they can do nothing other than speak. Moreover, it is the God of those same prophets who has raised the crucified Jesus. That same God, Peter claims "exalted him at his right hand as leader and savior to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins." Note that it is to Israel that Jesus has given repentance and forgiveness of sins. It was not to us, that is, we Gentiles that the promise first came—forgiveness is first offered to Israel.

Here in Acts we see reflected Paul's claim in Romans 11 that God has by no means rejected his people, Israel. God's promises are good and true, and our salvation continues to depend upon Israel and the Jews as God's promised people. As Paul says, "Through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!"

Of course, as Christian history has developed, Christian envy of the Jew for being God's promised people has reaped horrible results. Christians, a resurrection people, are never quite sure what to make of the fact that the Jews remain God's people. Our calling which was meant to make the Jews jealous turned out to make Christians envious and hateful. Ironically, this has resulted in Jews living more faithful to the way of Jesus than Christians themselves. For what other people have remained steadfast to loyalty to God than the Jews? It is the Jews who have learned to survive across the centuries in faithful remembrance and worship of God—without an army. They, after all, have lived more like Christians than Christians ever could. Which is but a reminder that when all is said and done, all this is about God and what God has made possible.

The Jews have not needed an army because they have had something better—memory. Memory, moreover, that is not some flimsy set of mental images, but a memory embodied in the unavoidable flesh of a people, a memory determined by law, by land, by worship. Thus even a non-practicing Jew remains a Jew, as God simply will not let them go. God's refusal to let the Jew go is the way God has chosen to grace lives with the memory that we are God's good creatures.

That the Jews have lived as a people by memory is a reminder that we Christians also live by memory. We do not just live by memory, but, in fact, we are memory, as we become part of God's very life through eucharistic sacrifice so that the world may know our God is the God who called Abraham from the Ur of the Chaldeans and has remained faithful to the promises to Israel. In fact, that is what our worship is—that is, it is a participation in God's remembering that the world may know that God has not and will not abandon God's good creation.

This is the reason we Christians cannot forget the horror of the Holocaust. We cannot forget it because it is not just history; it is not just something that happened to the Jews in Europe in the recent past. Rather, we cannot forget the Holocaust because

it must now be part of the Christian story, the Christian memory, just as Israel is always part of our story.

In the second century of the common era, Marcion, a Christian Gnostic, suggested that the Old Testament should be left behind and only snatches of the Gospel of Luke and the Pauline Epistles should be our scripture. In brief, Marcion wanted to free the church of the Jews and, in particular, the God of the Jews. The God of the Jews, the God of what we now call the Old Testament, Marcion thought far too material, too concerned with law and vengeance. Marcion thought resurrection meant that Jesus had freed us of the need for body and of the necessity of memory carried by our baptized bodies. The Church decisively rejected Marcion's attempt to create a pure Christianity free of the people of Israel because the Church saw clearly that Jesus is no mere idea, but the resurrected Jesus is the fleshly embodiment of Israel. To forget Israel would be nothing less than to lose the body and blood of our savior's life made present to us through Resurrection and Ascension. To forget Israel would mean that our Eucharist would be nothing but another meal.

Christianity is no universal truth that can be known in and of itself. Rather, what it means to be Christian is to know that God is known through the Jews and through this Jesus. That memory involves much terror. Ask the Canaanites, for example. Many today celebrate Israel's exodus from Egypt and the conquest of Canaan as "liberation," but the Canaanites did not feel liberated. Our history is filled with violence that we suppress in order to comfort ourselves that our God has really gotten over all that "unpleasantness." But such unpleasantness cannot be left behind. In the name of our gentle savior, we Christians have perpetrated horrible crimes—holocausts—that must be remembered.

But how do you remember something as terrible as the Holocaust? What was perpetrated there was surely so wrong that nothing can ever make it right. We can see a movie like *Schindler's List* and celebrate the triumph of the human spirit, in particular a spirit such as Schindler's, over such terror, but such a triumph is small comfort against six million deaths. The deep difficulty, in other words, is how can you remember the horror of the Holocaust or of slavery without telling yourself lies about such terror—(e.g., things really worked out all right in the long run). No, things have not worked out well in the long run. That they did not is why we are stuck in unending debate about who has been the most wronged.

Which brings us to our Gospel text for today. This text is often used to reassure ourselves that the Resurrection really happened. We come to this text as people who are a bit embarrassed that we believe in Jesus' resurrection because it just seems so, well, unusual—particularly for modern people like us. When candid we identify with Thomas—we want proof of this thing called resurrection. As modern people we confuse Resurrection with resuscitation of a corpse and we think that this text is an attempt to reassure us that such a resuscitation really happened. We think, like Thomas, if we could just see those wounded hands and that side with its spear gash we would really be assured that this thing really happened.

Resurrection is not, however, about the resuscitation of a corpse. What was extraordinary about the Resurrection is not that a dead man returned from the dead but that this man Jesus is the Lord's anointed who has, through resurrection, the power to forgive sins. Note that when Jesus appears to the apostles, his great work is that he breathes on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any,

they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” Only God has the power to forgive sins, but here we see that our Jesus has that power. That is the reason we know Resurrection is not the resuscitation of a dead corpse, but rather the sign that says Jesus is the second person of the Trinity who has the power to forgive sins—a power that has now been frighteningly given to us.

Thomas on being confronted with Jesus, on seeing that this resurrected one is the crucified one, makes the extraordinary response, “My Lord and my God!” What a strange response. You would think, given our assumption about “proof,” he might have said something like, “Oh! You’ve come back.” But that is not what he said. Rather, what is said is that this is the One with the power to forgive sins. It turns out it was not “proof” Thomas was after but Lordship. Resurrection is about God’s triumph over life determined by unending vengeance. God has the power to forgive sins, which of course is absolutely essential if we are to be a people of memory.

The great trick of being Christian, the magic of what it means to be who we are is that we know ourselves to be a forgiven and reconciled people. We know as a people of memory that we must remember horrors so terrible we wish to repress and deny that they ever existed exactly because they cannot be made right. When you are part of a history, a memory, as horrible as Holocaust, as slavery, there is nothing that can be done to make it right. The great temptation is to let time wash it away, to let it become a matter of forgetfulness—thus, we say “time heals all wounds.” Accordingly, we Americans try to deal with slavery and the genocide against Native Americans by relegating all that to the past. African-Americans and native peoples should quit using those terrors to produce guilt. After all, now we have civil rights, so what’s a little slavery between friends. We have tried to make up for part of the wrongs with affirmative action policies, though we, that is, we white people, have to confess that we are beginning to tire a bit of trying to be fair.

Yet we Christians remember, not because we like to wallow in guilt, but because we know we have been forgiven and thus made truthful rememberers. Such remembering, moreover, saves us from being the eternal victim. For we know as Christians that we have been freed from being victimized because our savior has defeated death and death’s lies. We have been made part of God’s great communion of saints, so those who would kill us can never determine who we are. Moreover, we know affirmative action can never be a substitute for penance, forgiveness, and reconciliation. For what penance and reconciliation names is the process through which we learn that the story of those we have harmed or who have harmed us cannot be forgotten since our God is the God of the Jews—they could never forget the Canaanites.

Therefore we remember that once we were no people, but now, through resurrection, we are God’s people—indeed, as we are told from *Revelation*, through his blood we have been made a kingdom of priests. Which is to say we are a people who have been made what we are by faithful memory. No doubt, at Jesus’ trial we would have been among those crying “Crucify him! Crucify him!”—but through the power of the Holy Spirit God has made us part of God’s people so that the world may know that we need not forget the terror of Christ’s crucifixion. For in forgetting the terror, we too often are prone to repeat it through attempts to make it right in order to assure our righteousness. Such strategies are left behind by our being a people who have received the Holy Spirit and thus are capable of being a forgiven people and, accordingly, are

capable of forgiveness. Only such a people can truthfully remember our sins; only such a people can live through memory, a memory that is no longer self-justifying but righteous. How wonderful it is to be part of such a people.

What a story we have to tell the world. What a different politics we have to hold up to the world—a politics of memory not governed by blame and guilt. Surely a people capable of being a forgiving people, capable of remembering the Holocaust will be blessed to God—yet do not expect the world to praise us for such remembering. The world does not want to be reminded. But what could be better news than to be God's people—that is, a people called to witness to God's triumph over the terror of the world's forgetfulness by being made participants in God's memory.