

From Memory to Hope
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
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Rev. John Cleghorn
Text: 2 Corinthians 5:17-20

Thirty-four years ago this month, as a high school senior, I made a college visit to a small school at the foot of a mountain in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. Its liberal arts curriculum, size, historic heritage, leadership in journalism education and beautiful campus won me over almost on the spot. I have been thankful for my association ever since then with Washington and Lee University.

To be perfectly honest, Washington and Lee at that time was known for accepting what used to be called “well-rounded” students. That’s college counselor code for students who may not have the highest GPA but who were multi-faceted and showed some promise. Today, my alma mater is recognized annually as one of the nation’s top small liberal arts schools on par with Davidson College up the road, another Presbyterian-founded school. It is a pioneer in service education and produces accomplished leaders who go on to many fields of endeavor. That wasn’t quite the case back in 1980. All of us alumni of that other era are mighty glad we got in when we did.

Like any institution of any age, Washington and Lee has a history and that history is part of its identity. Last year, the school was called to reconcile itself with a complicated part of its history. The “Lee” in the name of the school, you see, stands for Robert E. Lee, known for leading the confederate army in the Civil War. Immediately after the war, he served as president of what was then Washington College, named for George Washington. Lee proved to be a visionary and effective educator before he died in 1869 after only four years at the school. His work was committed to equipping the south to learn from its history, including its mistakes.

Last year, a group of African-American law students called a question that had been coming for years. In light of the school’s true intent to be a source of light and diverse learning for the 21st century, what does it need to say or do about some of its confederate-related history?

The law students asked for several actions to be taken. Some related to the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday. Others related to the public visibility of some old confederate memorabilia that was part of a history museum on campus.

As you might imagine, those requests stirred long-still waters and started a deep and vigorous discussion. For most of the last academic year, the university was a buzz about the role and the relevance of its past. But it wasn't just about the past, of course. It was about what the school stood for in the present and what the school would stand for in the future as it prepares leaders for the 21st century.

In the end, the President, faculty and the Board of Trustees worked with the African-American students who had called the question to resolve their concerns and amend some policies. Today, not just in my estimation but in many others, Washington and Lee University is a far healthier institution for it.

Why do I open today's sermon with that story, you might ask? What does it have to do with church and us at Caldwell?

One answer comes from that lasting piece of wisdom from the great southern writer William Faulkner. In his work titled Requiem for a Nun, Faulkner wrote: "The past isn't dead. It's not even the past." Faulkner meant that the past lives on to affect the present and the future. The past shaped societal norms, and still does. It shapes lives and generations of people, past and present. The past still shapes people's perspectives and biases and prejudices and blind spots in their dealings with each other and in every sphere of society, from commerce to religion to government and education.

The fingerprints of the past – good and bad - are found on today's laws, today's institutions today's racial patterns and relations, today's fortunes and today's bastions of poverty, today's country clubs and today's economic opportunity echo chambers. The past is a weight on the shoulders of some segments of society. Meanwhile other segments benefit from the past in ways they may not even recognize or be willing to acknowledge. One term for that is white privilege.

No, as Faulker said, if we are truly honest, the past is never, ever dead. At Washington and Lee and with so many parts of America today, we need to reconcile ourselves with our past because doing so is necessary and healing for the heart and the soul and critical to the future.

We used that word, "reconcile" a lot here at Caldwell back in August when we hosted De and Jimmie Lee Kirkpatrick. We listened to the story of how they are reconciling their lives with their connected past.

As you recall, Jimmie Lee, who is black, recently presented the truth to De, who is white, that De's great-great grandfather owned Jimmie Lee's great-great-great grandfather on a plantation in southern Mecklenburg County decades ago.

We learned from their walk of reconciliation and how they are sharing the painful reality and the vulnerability of their revelation – how it makes them feel about who they are, where they came from, where they are going, in their individual lives and now, as friends, together.

As people of faith, as followers of Christ Jesus, we are called to be people of reconciliation, peacemakers, conflict-enders, even when there is pain involved, because that is how we bring about healing. And healing should be one of the main ends of the church.

We have the ultimate model of reconciliation in our Lord Jesus Christ and it is that model we are to follow and to emulate. That is the Christian life, isn't it?

In Christ, our lives are made right. In Christ, God answers the conflict and the pain that our brokenness brings into the world, into our hearts and into our human relationships. Christ's own message equips us to be reconcilers, to be peacemakers. In Christ, all things are reconciled and made new. That is the Gospel.

That's what the Apostle Paul told the first-century church at Corinth in the scripture we heard earlier. There was conflict in that church, as with any church. Some questioned Paul's authority. Others defended Paul and criticized Paul's opponents. Other disputes and disagreements festered as well.

In today's passage, 2 Corinthians 5:17-20, Paul writes to say that the people at Corinth weren't thinking about things the way they should have been. Christ changed everything, he says. God's people are no longer to quibble so much with each other. Christ came that we might have new eyes and new hearts. We are no longer to keep spreadsheets of offenses and hurts others have done to us. We are to be about the work of forgiveness and reconciliation.

"In Christ, there is a new creation," Paul writes, "everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"

In effect, Paul tells the Corinthians and us, we are to put on our brand new Christ goggles and see all the world and all relationships through their lenses of grace and

love, peacemaking, justice and healing. That is the way we reconcile ourselves to God, Paul says.

In our daily lives, Christ calls us to seek reconciliation with family members and friends, co-workers or neighbors, to find the strength to be vulnerable, to admit our faults, our hurt and wounded-ness, our betrayal and dishonesty and to seek a new beginning.

But hear me when I add a very important caveat to all of that. We cannot truly be people of reconciliation, we cannot truly heal relationships between individuals or groups of people if we skip over the hard parts, the edgy parts, the parts that make us uncomfortable, the parts we would just as soon avoid.

The great 20th century theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer called that kind of cop out “cheap grace.” There is nothing about God’s work in Christ in the world that is cheap or easy. Our failures and brokenness aren’t fixed with a quick wave of God’s magic wand. Instead, we are truly reconciled only when we do the hard work of understanding and owning the pain we have caused in the world in relation to others.

We don’t get to be what Paul calls “ambassadors for Christ” by taking the easy way. We can’t simply write off in the mail to get a certificate that makes us “ambassadors for Christ.” Christ died for more than that, and we must live for more than that.

So we must first remember. A wise person once said that to “forget is to sin.” We need to take that to heart as people of faith. We must first remember so that we can learn and grow and live anew.

Indeed, the arc of God’s story as told in the Bible is one that moves from memory, toward hope. Over and over again, the children of Israel were told to remember who they were and whose they were. They forgot, more than once of course, turning away from God, turning toward idols and false gods, turning away from their roots and their heritage as a chosen and liberated people.

Yet, in God’s grace, God accepted them back again, time and again, until God came in Christ to offer a new promise to all people, a new covenant, one of new life and possibility, one of new purpose and calling. That calling is to remember who Christ was and is, why Christ lived and died and was resurrected. Then we can offer our hands as his hands and our feet as his feet.

So we remember, because memory is the first part of God’s story with us. Then, we hope, because of the new life we have in Christ. From memory to hope. From memory

to hope. That is the pattern of the Christian life. Avoiding the sin of forgetting. Taking full measure of our failures and those of humankind down through the ages, any time women and men have sinned against God by oppressing or mistreating others. And once we have fully remembered, once we have fully plumbed the depth and the damage of humanity's wrong doing or our own on a personal level, we are then invited into liberation, into the work of reconciliation, of peacemaking, of healing relationships that humanity's sin, including our own, has damaged.

Friends, I ask you to keep all of this in your heart in the days to come. As a church made up of regular people – which means broken people - we will always have fences to mend, relationships to patch up. This is a place of remarkable love and kindness and, most times, whatever damage has been done can be fixed in covenants of grace and humility. That's important to our daily living together.

But I ask you to keep all of this in mind for a bigger reason. As you know, we have undertaken an initiative called Discipleship of Race and Class, fully aware that interracial relationships, especially require both honesty and humility, truth-telling and honest forgiveness, on both sides. We are working, together, to get past the first or second layer of our inter-racial understanding. We are unpacking the differences between black and white, especially, that our relationships with each other might be even more meaningful.

Elder Beth Van Gorp brought us so much valuable historical information about this church during our centennial. Now she has new information to bring to light about our church's past. It is the story of where this church got its name. Caldwell is named for a family whose benefactor gave the church the equivalent of three quarters of a million dollars in 1922.

That's a lot of money. In the years that followed, God used that money to help build buildings and ministries here that touched lives, served neighbors and spread the Gospel for generations.

Our bricks and mortar are quite literally made up of that money and the good the family wanted it to accomplish. But that money also has a history to it – and that history takes us back to what has been called "America's original sin," the institution of slavery that shapes lives still today.

Just as Washington and Lee was called to reconcile itself to its history, just as we are called to be people of reconciliation in Christ, we at Caldwell need to hear this story – to remember it in our own way, even if we were not directly a part of it. For, by

remembering, we can then be about the business of healing God's world and living into our shared hope in Christ Jesus.

That is where we pick it back up next Sunday. See you here then. Amen.