

Remembrance as a Sacrament

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By Reverend Richard Poethig

“My father was a homeless Aramean who went down to Egypt with a small company and lived there until they became a great, powerful and numerous nation.” Deuteronomy 26:3

People have a way of forgetting who they are and where they have come from. As the generations pass they get further away from the events which shaped them as people. The newborn do not know the struggles which others have gone through to win for them the benefits which they take for granted.

On my wall at home I have the marriage certificate of my grandfather Richard Alwin Poethig and my grandmother Pauline Roch. It is gold engraved with appropriate Scripture written in German and dated 1883 in the City of New York. Above the picture I have my grandfather's hand carved pipe in which he smoked the ends of his cigars.

The certificate and pipe remind me of their struggles as newcomers to this land. My grandfather was a cigar maker and he was a strong union man. It was out of the cigar makers union that Samuel Gompers, who was also a cigar maker from England, built the American Federation of Labor. One of the things that impressed me was that the union back 100 years ago had “Krankenkase” – that's German for health insurance. They also had death benefits and social security.

When I look at that marriage certificate and the pipe I remember the heritage of my grandfather, who alongside many other working people, in their unions, fought hard so that we in this land could have social security, death benefits and health insurance. The man whose name is on those laws, the hours and wage act and social security is Robert Wagner, who knew the history and traditions of those unions.

So we need to be ever reminded of where we have come from and the struggles of those who have gone on before us. Forgetfulness is a problem for all of us. We forget that the fabric of the nation depends upon moral and ethical beliefs, which remind us of our responsibility to a Creator.

We are not good at history in the United States, particularly religious history. The land was settled out of religious motivations and a good part of the driving force to survive in the wilderness and in the settling of the country was religiously inspired. Even the struggle for freedom against the crown—the revolution for independence—was fought by men and women who believed in a God who alone was sovereign and was the Lord of conscience.

Very early in their history, the Jews took care that they would never forget who they were and to whom they owed their existence. As soon as they settled in the land, after their struggles in the wilderness, it was required of the Jew to stand in the holy place, after he or she had presented the first fruits of the ground and recite: “My father was a homeless Aramean who went down to Egypt with a small company and lived there until they became a great, powerful, and numerous nation.” It was a story of remembrance.

They were to remember from where they had come and how they had gotten to this place. It was the story of deliverance. The chief actor in the drama was never forgotten. “We cried unto the Lord and he heard our cry and delivered us out of the hand of the Egyptians and gave us this land.”

The land was a gift. It was not theirs to own. Only God owned the land. The Psalms told them that, "The earth is the Lords' and the fullness thereof..." And when they thought that the land was theirs because of who they were, the prophets reminded them what God wanted was that they do justly. The Lord had given them the land in the first place.

This past week I read a moving remembrance written by a Native American. It was written upon his return to his birth place after many years. He told how deeply attached he felt to his town and to the land. It was not as an owner, since he owned nothing, but because it gave his life special meaning.

"The land is everything," he writes, "not just the soil, the ground as a specific location. The landscape becomes a part of you, or more accurately, you are a part of the landscape, a living part of living creation."

He went on to point out that the great difference between the American Indian and European when they came to this continent was that the Europeans were used to abstracting the land, making title for it, and buying and selling it like any other goods. For the Indian this could not be: "The landscape cannot be appropriated to individual ownership. It is there for all people alike, as a dimension in which we have existence with other creatures."

The relationship of the American Indian to the land, which is close to this morning's Scripture is summed up in the classic words of Chief Seattle, the 19th century Indian leader: "How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. "If you do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them?"

"Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every clearing and humming insect is holy in the memory of my people. The sap which courses through the trees carries the memory of the red man."

Israel was told to remember from whence they had come. They were told that their very freedom was a gift from the God who had delivered them from the hands of those who had enslaved them. The land became Israel's sign of deliverance. The land represented wholeness...joy...well being. Israel was reminded that the land could not be separated from God the Creator, whose it is.

This story is our story as well. We remember all those who have brought us to this place. We remember everything we have is only ours as we use it for the wellbeing of the earth. We remember that our greatest gift is the freedom, which we have to believe. We guard even the right of those who choose not to believe. But even they have to be reminded of the sacrifices made by those that they could have this freedom.

Remembrance is a sacrament. When we engage in remembering we become a part of the history, which has created us. We cannot remember without reenacting the sacrifices, which have been made for us to bring us to this place.

Jesus knew that. That is why we have the Lord's Supper. At our Agape Meal this past Ash Wednesday we reenacted the sacrifice—the giving without asking. So we would never forget...Jesus tells us: "This is my body...this is my blood...do this in remembering me."