

Remember

Adapted from a sermon by Rev. Todd A. Peperkorn

Portions of his homily, adapted from a sermon by Rev. Aaron Koch

Our text for tonight is a portion of the epistle lesson read earlier, Hebrews chapter 13, Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Remember! That is an important word this time of year. You need to remember what everybody put on their Christmas list. You need to remember rehearsal times for the Christmas program. You need to remember so many things.

Remember also has to do with the past. Whether it be Christmas cookies, the skirt around the tree, or even what you eat for Christmas dinner, everything this month seems to hold memories. We can't have that for Christmas dinner because we always have ham, or whatever the tradition may be in your family.

Memories connect us to the past, to family and friends, to seasons gone past and to times and places long gone. A sight, a sound, or even a smell can bring all of these remembered things back to us.

But this season is about more than simply memories of family or times gone by. The Christian faith has a history and a life, the life of Christ lived out in the lives of His people. That is why St. Paul writes in our Epistle text, *Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.*

Paul exhorts all Christians to remember the leaders who spoke to you the Word of God. Each of us is to imitate their way of life. We are to walk in their path and imitate their faith. That is the remembering which the Scriptures invite us to do as baptized Christians.

This is often a little hard for us American Christians, though. We have a tendency to think that there was Jesus, then the time of the apostles, then the Reformation, and then today. We have a very short view of history. I think I could even say that we have spiritual amnesia. Maybe it isn't amnesia, because that would mean we have forgotten something we once knew.

Collectively, we have forgotten who we are and where we came from because we do not really want to know. Most do not take the time even to study the Scriptures and remember them, much less learn about and remember other times and people of the church.

And, because collectively we have forgotten to even remember or consider the things of our Christian heritage, very often we don't know where we're going or why it even matters. Too often, as our society panders to us, we want the newest and the best. Sometimes, just for the very reason that it is new.

Today, we will take a moment and remember, trying to recapture a little of the fact that what we

may have forgotten really does matter. We remember St. Nicholas, who lived in the 4th Century.

He is remembered in church history as St. Nicholas of Myra. He is one of the saints, or one of the Christians who have gone before, about whom we know some things. Most often we connect St. Nicholas to Jolly Ole' Saint Nick, Sinter Klaus, or Santa Claus, which is the Dutch form of Nicholas. Who is this man? More importantly, why should we remember him? What can he teach us about the life of the Christian as we prepare to celebrate our Lord's coming into our flesh?

Today we will remember the real St. Nicholas. This is a man who was passionate about his Savior Jesus Christ. The truth of Christ was preeminent in all that he did, for his teachings and reflected in his life. This is why we are to remember him.

Nicholas was born into a wealthy family in Asia Minor, what is now Turkey. Unfortunately, he was orphaned at a young age. It is said that he was raised by his uncle—also named Nicholas—who was the bishop of Patara. Having become a Christian, Nicholas chose not to pursue a life of riches but instead devoted himself to service in Christ's church. He eventually became bishop or pastor of a city called Myra. Myra was a decadent and corrupt city, and Nicholas became well known in his efforts to transform it by his pious hard work and preaching of the Word of Christ.

St. Nicholas was also known for his love for those in need, such as poor widows and orphaned children. As bishop he saw to it that the church worked to care for those less fortunate and in need. Perhaps it was this giving of gifts, especially to impoverished children, that became part of the formation of the Santa Claus tradition.

And there is one story in particular about Nicholas that stands out above the rest and is the most famous. There was a man in the city of Myra who had three daughters. But this man did not have enough money to provide his daughters with the suitable dowries necessary for them to get married in those days. Without being able to marry it was likely that they would end up as prostitutes. Nicholas was deeply troubled about this for a number of reasons, and he decided to help. But he chose to do so in a way that wouldn't draw attention to himself.

Evidently taking from his own resources, Nicholas prepared three bags of gold. On three successive nights St. Nicholas went to this man's house and threw a bag of gold into one of the open windows, one bag of gold each night for each of the three daughters, sufficient to provide each of them with the necessary dowry.

Later on when this story was told in colder regions, Nicholas was portrayed dropping the bags of gold down the chimney. Still to this day three golden bags or golden spheres are the sign of a pawnbroker, in remembrance of how Nicholas bought these three daughters out of hock, you might say. He was in a way, redeeming and rescuing them from the fate that awaited them.

Nicholas was known as a kind and generous man, but he was also a man who believed strongly in the Gospel and person of Jesus Christ as Son of God and Son of Mary - not only true Man, but also true God. Nicholas was probably at the Council of Nicea, where our Nicene Creed was written, and where Jesus was defended as the only-begotten Son of God.

Some early writers claim he participated in the Council of Nicea and, when theological debate failed, that he punched a heretic who argued that Jesus was not fully divine. I don't know that I would agree with that method. If nothing else, imagining Santa Claus punching out Arius, the one who was stating that Jesus wasn't fully divine, would definitely change the way I ever look at Santa Claus again. I do not agree with his method for correcting false teachers, but I do admire his passion for maintaining the truth of Christian doctrine.

I would have to agree with him. Whether the story is true or is not, it is obvious that people of Nicholas' time were impressed with his desire that the church surrender not one inch of ground in doctrine concerning the two natures united in Christ - fully divine and fully human. We could learn from him today, and why we should - REMEMBER! Today, there are some churches which are unwilling to make statements claiming that Jesus is fully divine, that He actually performed all the miracles or said all the words ascribed to Him in the Gospel, that He was born of a virgin, or even that He was a man. I pray we can firmly proclaim all these truths of Christ, but without resorting to physical violence.

Is the story of his punching out a heretic true? We can ask him later. However, we do know some truth concerning how passionate Nicholas was about what he believed to be true of Jesus the Christ? Nicholas was imprisoned under the Emperor Diocletian, tortured and then hailed as a "confessor" because he refused to renounce his faith. He was released under Constantine and died around 350 A.D.

It is interesting, though, that these two aspects of Nicholas' life are intimately tied together - Nicholas' defense of Jesus as the Son of God and his generosity to those in need, especially children. It reminds me of our explanation to the Creed:

I believe that Jesus Christ, true God begotten of the Father from eternity and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord. Who has redeemed me, not with gold or silver, but with His holy precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death....

So often in the Scriptures and in life, God uses little things to teach us about big things. For many hundreds of years, it has become a tradition in Europe to give gifts on St. Nicholas' Day, December 6. These gifts are to be anonymous. If a child were to ask where these presents came from, the answer is supposed to be "From St. Nicholas." This is not to say that St. Nicholas gave the gift, but, that the gift is given anonymously. The rest, as they say, is history.

But this tradition of gift giving can and does serve a greater purpose than an excuse to be nice. Every good and perfect gift comes from above. The gifts that we give to our children are hollow and meaningless if we do not give them the gift that St. Nicholas gave week in and week out as a Pastor in Christ's church. That is, the gift of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins.

St. Paul says that we are to remember our leaders who spoke the Word of God, consider their way of life and imitate their faith. St. Nicholas put His faith in Jesus Christ, even if it meant suffering for him, and eventually his own death. This Christmastide, as you remember the price God paid for your salvation, remember the long line of saints who have gone before. Give your gifts to others with generosity and joy, knowing that the ultimate price has already been paid by

Christ Jesus. The gifts we give to one another? They are just candy canes on the tree. Think about it! In the name of Jesus. Amen.