

Hebrews 13: 7-9a "Imitating Faith" Rev. Janet Chapman 10/31/21

It is interesting to me that even though we are in the middle of the World Series, I haven't seen too many kids dressed up in baseball uniforms or any sports figure for that fact. It used to be that sports figures were among the top costumes for Halloween right up there with real life and super heroes but not so anymore. I came across an old article while waiting in the doctor's office of Sports Illustrated which polled a number of major league players to determine their knowledge of baseball. But the poll wasn't about rules or who would win the pennant; it was about the game's past. The magazine posed the question, "How much do you know about the first 100 years of your sport?" The answer was pretty clear: not much. When asked, "who were the most famous New York Yankees of all time?", the star first baseman at that time admitted that, before he'd joined the Yankees, he believed Babe Ruth was just a candy bar and Mickey Mantle was a cartoon character. With a few exceptions, the other players didn't do much better; their knowledge of the players who had gone before them and paved their way was almost non-existent. In their defense, the manager of the Expos remarked, "I think most guys know the names of Babe Ruth and Hank Aaron because these players aren't dumb. They know a lot of things, like the name of the man they're pitching against and their agent's cell number. They know those things. It's the retired guys they have trouble with, the guys from the past." The result of the poll offered a few snickers but also highlighted a common, somewhat depressing ailment of our society – it's very easy to forget about the folks from the past, to discard what has brought us to today, when our vision goes no further than the edge of our own lives.

Of course, we are talking about more than baseball now. James Van Tholen points out that we live in a postmodern society, a society that more than ever before stresses progress, independence, change, and the importance of focusing on the future even at the expense of the past. Just this week, in an effort to supposedly “turn over a new leaf,” Facebook is changing its name to “Meta,” trying to change its image from battered social network to tech innovator, focusing on building the next generation of online interaction, known as the “metaverse.” That makes me feel better, how about you? A commercial which thankfully is now off the air featured two young people of the same age, one pictured diligently studying for an exam on the Spanish-American war or some such event, while the other was already out of school making big money and having fun. The ad ends with the comment by the money man, “While he’s studying the past, I’m building the future with ITT Tech.” Every time I saw it, I cringed because I firmly believe in the value of studying history, even if making a career in such can be difficult. We need such studies because history does repeat itself; one philosopher noted that it is a good thing history repeats itself because people rarely listen the first time.

We are moving forward into the future so fast that the accomplishments, the people and the importance of the past get lost along the way. It is particularly sad when this happens within the church because in the church’s case, it’s not just the memory of a person we’re losing, but we are often losing a vital component of our faith. That is what lies behind the words in Hebrews we have today. Here we read an invitation to guard the deposit you have received, to stand firm, and hold on to the teachings that were passed on to you and, as verse 7 says, “Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you.” The author of Hebrews commends the leaders in the church who reflect Christ and encourages following in

their footsteps. The listeners of the text don't have to think too hard about who these folks are, because their church is only a few decades old, maybe just a few years old. They know how these leaders lived, who they were, how they lived, and how they died. But that isn't the point – the text isn't about imitating them, it is about imitating their faith. It's not about remembering the way they spoke; it's about remembering that they spoke the word of God, that they worshipped with meaning. It is about coming to admire these people so that your faith begins to reflect the same. The author is talking about tapping into that gift of worship, not tasks such as flipping pages in the hymnal or following along in the bulletin which offer worshipers all the spiritual scenery of a subway ride. No, this is worship Hebrews describes as a sacrifice of praise to God. The work of actually praising God and meaning it is transformative; it changes us. Gray Temple says it works like this: You come to resemble what you admire; People who admire money can get green and crinkly. People who admire computers can grow user-unfriendly. People who admire youth can become juvenile. People who actively and deliberately admire Jesus Christ, come to resemble him as he actually was and remains today; generous, tender, fierce, joyful, courageous, somewhat mischievous, and fully open to others once he got himself sorted out. Real worship is practicing the admiration of Christ; imitating the faith of Christ and those who have faithfully followed Christ. Real worship is the engine that drives personal transformation. So every Sunday, we seek to enter into moments of worship out of love for our God more than love for dogma or respectability or protocol. We seek to remember those who worshipped before us, who spoke the word of God to us, so that our faith can be pure and grounded.

The world can change, styles can change, culture and language can change, but God is the same and so is Christ in reflecting God. Jesus' career will always be the center of history, so we seek to remember Christ, to guard the deposit we've been given, to stand firm and hold onto the teachings that have been passed on to us that reflect the character of God. Nowhere in our understanding of worship is that more truthfully portrayed than at the Lord's Table. Here we remember and reenact words and actions of that meal Jesus shared with his friends the night before he was crucified. We do this because it is one of the few direct and to the point commandments Jesus gives in scripture, "Do this in remembrance of me... do this." He doesn't say, "when you happen to schedule it on the calendar, then remember me;" not "when it fits into the church's programming" or "when enough people show up" or "just on holidays, then remember me." He said, "Whenever you gather," and these days that means online as well, "whenever you gather in my name, do this in remembrance of me... and with all the company of heaven." Everyone we have loved and lost, through Christ's presence at this table, meets us here. It is the communion of the saints, saints in the making just like you and I, who are aided by history which repeats itself for short attention spans, as well as the word of God which has been spoken from our former leaders. Let us prepare for the future by remembering our past.