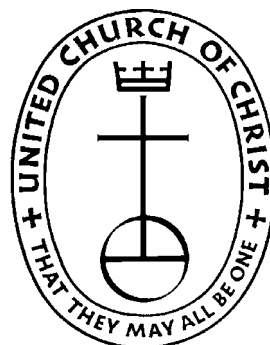


# A Room Called Remember

A Sermon By —  
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May 30, 2010



This sermon shows how memories of the past may bring new hope for the future.

**FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH**

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,  
Passionately Committed to Social Justice*  
241 Cedar Avenue, Long Beach, California

Rev. Jerald Stinson  
May 30, 2010 (#1402)  
Readings: I Chronicles 16:1, 7-12

First Congregational Church  
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## A Room Called Remember

Memorial Day – a time of remembrance created originally to make sense of the horror of the American Civil War.

Citizens of Waterloo, New York claim they created Memorial Day in 1865 when, with flags at half mast, they laid black draperies of mourning on the graves of Union soldiers.

But Columbus, Mississippi also claims to have been first in 1866 when a former Confederate chaplain led women to the town cemetery to place flowers on the graves of 1,500 Confederate and 100 Union soldiers who had died in the Battle of Shiloh.

Similar claims to having started this holiday are made by people in Boalsburg, Pennsylvania and Belle Island in the James River. But in all those locations, soldiers who died on Civil War battlefields were remembered and honored.

Ever since, this holiday has remembered those willing to give their lives in war on behalf of others. But over the years, the holiday's scope has broadened to include remembering all those we have loved who are no longer with us. It is a day for placing flowers on graves, lighting candles and special prayers.

Two points of focus then.

First, honoring those who died on battlefields. I think we best do that by working for peace. The best way to honor fallen warriors is to prevent other young men and women from having to experience what they experienced, to keep other young men and women from either killing or dying.

Novelist Herman Wouk, whose novels have brought home the reality of war for many, said, "The beginning of the end of war lives in remembrance ... The only way to make peace is to remember what war is truly like." Our faith, centered on one who preached and modeled civil disobedience, one who sought justice for all but never by drawing a sword, one who came to be known as the Prince of Peace – our faith, inspired by his life, tells us that we best remember those in military cemeteries by becoming peacemakers.

The second aspect of Memorial Day focuses on a broader sweep of memory – the memories each of us have of loved ones who have died: parents, children, lovers, partners, neighbors, colleagues, friends.

Novelist Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian minister, has written a powerful book entitled *A Room Called Remember*. He began with a discussion of dreams, writing:

*Every once in a while, you have a dream that wakes you up.*

*Sometimes it is a bad dream in which the shadows become so menacing your heart skips a beat and you come awake to the knowledge that not even the actual darkness of night is as fearsome as the dreamed darkness.*

*Sometimes it is a sad dream, sad enough to bring tears to your sleeping eyes.*

*Or there are dreams that take a turn so absurd that you wake laughing.*

*Rarest of all is the dream that wakes you with what I can only call its truth.*

He said:

*Several years ago, I had such a dream. I dreamt I was staying in a hotel and the room I was given was a room that I loved. It wasn't so much the way the room looked as it was the way it made me feel. It was a room where I felt happy and at peace, where everything seemed the way it should be and everything about myself seemed the way it should be too.*

*As the dream went on, I wandered to other places but ended back at the same hotel again. I was given a different room in which I did not feel comfortable at all.*

*I made my way to the front desk and told the clerk my problem. The trouble was I didn't know where the room was or how to ask for it. But the understanding clerk said he knew exactly the room I meant. He said it was a room called Remember.*

*And that was what shocked me awake. I knew it was good dream and that in some unfathomable way it was also a true dream. But why remember? What about remembering brought a peace so deep, a sense of well-being so complete and intense that it jolted me awake?*

Buechner went on:

*One way or another, we are always remembering. In one sense the past is dead and gone, but in another sense it is not done with at all or at least not done with us.*

*Every person we have ever known, every place we have ever been, everything that has ever happened to us – it all lives and breathes deep in us somewhere, whether we like it or not.*

*And sometimes it doesn't take much to bring it back to the surface. A scrap of some song popular years ago. A book we read as a child. A stretch of road we used to travel. There is no telling what trivial thing may do it, and then suddenly there it is, something that happened to us once.*

*Old failures, old hurts. Times too beautiful to tell or too terrible.*

Now Buechner's dream said more to him than simply that all our memories dwell within us and often come to the surface. His dream was about a room where all emotions were caught up in and transcended by an extraordinary sense of well-being, a room where he felt at home and at peace.

Now to enter that room required a conscious act. He said:

*We are all escape artists. We don't like to get too serious about things, especially about ourselves. When we are with other people, we are apt to talk about almost anything except what really matters to us. We hold each other at bay, keep our distance.*

*And it is the same when we are alone. Let's say it is late evening. The time is ripe for looking back over the day, the week, the year, and trying to figure out where we have come from and where we are going, for sifting through things we have done and left undone for a clue as to who we are and who we are becoming.*

*But we avoid the long thoughts. We turn on the television. We pick up a newspaper or book. We find some chore to do that could easily wait for another day. We cling to the present out of wariness of the past.*

But Buechner's dream convinced him we must make the conscious choice to go back and dwell among our memories, for that's what ultimately gets us into that peaceful room. He said:

*What entering that room means is taking time to remember on purpose. It means a deep, slow kind of remembering. "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen" goes the old spiritual, and of course nobody knows the trouble we have any of us seen – the hurt, the sadness, the mistakes, the crippling losses – but we know it. We are to remember it.*

*And the happiness we have seen – the precious times, precious people, moments in our lives when we were better than we know how to be. Nobody knows that either, but we know it. We are to remember.*

*And then, if my dream was really a true dream, we will find beyond any feelings of joy or regret that one by one the memories give rise to a profound and undergirding peace; a sense that in some way, all is well. We have survived, you and I. Maybe that is at the heart of our remembering.*

*To remember my life is to remember countless times when I might have given up, gone under, when humanly speaking I might have gotten lost beyond the power of any to find me. But I didn't.*

*The dream tells us that weak as we are, a strength beyond our strength has pulled us through at least this far. Foolish as we are, a wisdom beyond our wisdom has flickered up just often enough to light us if not to the right path through the forest, at least to a path that leads forward, that is bearable. Faint of heart as we are, a love beyond our power to love has kept our hearts alive.*

*So in the room called Remember it is possible to find peace.*

Now I think the peace in Buechner's room called Remember is what links our memories of the past to our hope for the future. Finally to my biblical text for today from the Book of Chronicles in the Hebrew Bible.

The people of ancient Israel had faced hard times; their decentralized tribal confederation had not worked well in the face of strong neighboring enemies. They sought a king who might unify them. And so David, that king, created a new capital city not tied to any tribal identity, and as a symbol of great hope, he helped carry the Ark of the Covenant to that city, Jerusalem. The Ark was where the god of the Hebrews, Yahweh, was said to visit. In dedicating the ark, David composed a psalm that said, "Give thanks to our God, and call on God's name. Sing to God, sing praise. Turn to our God and seek God's presence constantly. Remember [and there's that word] the marvels God has done, the wonders performed and the judgments pronounced."

On a joyful day of hope, David told the people to remember. Looking back, remembering, entering that room called Remember, might be for them, as for us, the key to finding new hope.

I spoke recently with a man who had traveled overseas with Patch Adams, a doctor made famous by a 1998 movie bearing his name. My mind went back to that film.

On screen, Patch Adams, played by Robin Williams, committed himself to a psychiatric hospital. Suicidal, he knew he needed help but didn't get that help from the medical staff. Nevertheless he found his way to recovery, to hope, as he himself helped fellow patients. Through serving others, he got better.

Adams left the institution, later enrolling in medical school, wanting to be a doctor who puts patients first, who knows them by name rather than symptom, who laughs with patients and treats them as equals. Much of the movie focuses on the collision of this maverick character with the medical establishment.

At a certain point, Patch and Carin, a young medical student with whom he had fallen in love, and Truman, his best friend – the three of them started a medical facility based on all those things of such importance to Patch. But in a horrible tragedy, a patient, mentally far more ill than any of them suspected, murdered Carin, the one Patch loved.

Patch's memories were filled with grief and guilt. And there's a scene with Patch standing at the edge of a precipice, railing at God. "You created us, but you rested on the seventh day. Maybe you should have spent it on compassion."

Patch wanted God to answer. He wanted to know if Carin was all right. As he turned around, there on the bag he had brought with him was a butterfly, which flew over and rested on Adams himself. A butterfly which had emerged from a cocoon of death, a butterfly that spoke of new possibilities, of life, of hope.

Ten years ago, just a few months before I came to Long Beach, my mother died after a struggle with Alzheimer's. It was a sad and difficult time. But just four months after her death, on Easter Sunday, at a sunrise service next to ocean, I held in my arms and baptized my second grandchild. Amidst my memories of death and loss, there came hope and new life.

Naturalist Loren Eisley was traveling in the mountains. He sat down to rest. Tired, he soon fell asleep. A cry awoke him. He looked into the glade — bathed in light that gave the illusion of a cathedral — and on a dead branch he saw a tiny nestling squirming in the beak of an enormous raven.

Eisley wrote:

*The sound that awoke me was the outraged cries of the nestling's parents who flew helplessly in circles about the clearing. The raven was indifferent to them. He gulped, whetted his beak on the dead branch a moment, and sat still. Up that point the tragedy had followed the usual pattern.*

*But suddenly, out of that area of woodland, a soft sound of complaint began to rise. Into the glade fluttered small birds of half a dozen varieties drawn by the anguished outcries of the tiny parents. No one dared attack the raven. But they cried in some instinctive common misery, the bereaved and the unbereaved. The glade filled with their soft rustling and their cries. They fluttered as though to point their wings at the murderer. There was a dim, intangible ethic he had violated, and they knew. He was a bird of death. And he sat there, formidable, unmoving, untouchable.*

*The sighing died. It was then I saw the judgment of life against death. I will never see it again so forcefully presented. I will never hear it again in notes so tragically prolonged. For in the midst of the protest, the birds forgot the violence. There, in the clearing, the crystal note of a song sparrow lifted hesitantly in the hush. And finally, after painful fluttering, another took up the song, then another, the song passing from one bird to another, doubtfully at first, as though some evil thing was slowly forgotten. Till suddenly they took heart and sang from many throats joyously together as birds are known to sing. They sang because life is sweet and sunlight beautiful. They sang under the brooding shadow of the raven. They were singers of life, and not of death."*

This is a day of memories – good memories and bad memories, happy memories and sad memories, memories of dead soldiers and of dead loved ones. But when we look at those memories in that room called Remember, perhaps we can find hope, hope that will let us be singers of life even in the face of death. Amen.