

Memorial Reflections

Text: Jonah 3: 1-6,10; Mark 1: 14-20

Used: Cong. Church of Naugatuck – 1/24/09

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the mediations of our hearts, be acceptable unto Thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Sometimes life events sneak up on you. I had that happen when I realized this week that it was the twenty-fifth anniversary of my father's death. He passed into God's care January 15, 1984 and his funeral fell on my seventeenth birthday twenty-five years ago.

Over the past twenty-five years, I have found that the one way I have missed my father most of all is that there are times when I'd like to sit down and have a really good conversation with him. I'd like to talk with him about how the world, and in particular the church, has changed over the past twenty-five years. Over this past week I've been playing this conversation out in my mind a lot. And I thought this morning, I'd let you in on some of this conversation. It is definitely not the exhaustive account or we'd be here until next Sunday morning. But I thought a glimpse into this conversation would be a different way for us to reflect upon issues of society, faith and discipleship this morning. So here it goes...

So it has been twenty-five years, Dad. Twenty five years since you have walked this earth. Some amazing things have happened in that time. Tragic things as well. And some things you probably wouldn't even believe.

Let's start with the fact the Boston Red Sox have actually won two World Series. Can you believe that? But don't worry *my* Yankees have won four...so all is still right with the world. Oh, and your team, the Dodgers, only one.

Another thing you might not believe is how different technology is. I remember how excited you were when we bought our first VCR in the early eighties. I think it weighed about eighty pounds. Today there are DVRs and Tivos that record programs digitally, cell phones that you carry on you belt and plug a wireless earpiece into your ears, Palm Pilots and Blackberrys that you keep your schedule and addresses, GPS units to tell you how to drive to certain places, and, of course, the internet where you play, shop, bank, study, and do most anything else imaginable. Interestingly enough, Mom seems to have most every technological doohickey known to human kind. Of course, we kids receive many calls asking us how to make the different doohickeys work . And now that we are in our late thirties

and early forties, we find that we are turning to our kids to help us understand these things, so we in turn can help Mom.

The world has changed in many other ways. War still continues in our world, but its nature is somewhat different. It is less about the geo-political boundaries of nation states and more about different political and religious ideologies and about the control of assets. Yet hatred still breeds violence. Even in the past couple decades we have seen attempts at genocide in Bosnia and the Sudan.

But there are triumphs as well. Who would have thought that less than fifty years after Rev. King shared with us the words of his dream from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial that down the other end of the Washington Mall, on Capital Hill, another African-American man would be sharing with us the words of his presidential inauguration address? And yet this week it happened. As I listened, I had tears in my eyes for I knew this was a major historical event. How far we've come!

Yet, I must say, as I saw pictures of all the people on the Mall wearing "The Dream Realized" t-shirts I was concerned that we might feel the journey was over. This was a triumph in the battle against racial prejudice but there is still so much more to do. I think Dr. King

would be the first to say that a piece of his dream was realized, but much like Joseph we need to keep on dreaming.

I know I too have a dream. Ever since Emily became part of our family, Paige and I have been preparing her for the prejudice she'll face as an Asian-American women. And at the young age of six, she already encountered racism several times. My dream is for a day when parents no longer have to prepare the kids to deal with the barbs of racism. That day will be more than a historical event. It will be a testimony to changed human character.

Dad, of all the things that have changed over the past twenty-five years, perhaps nothing has changed as much as the church you loved so much. Well, perhaps that is not entirely correct. What has really changed is the church and its relationship to society.

Fifty-two years ago when you were first ordained, and even eighteen years ago when I was ordained, the church, and its place in society, was different then it is today. Through most of American history the church was an institution that was held in high-esteem and privileged by society. This is no longer the case in the same way. When you were first ordained, tithing – giving ten percent of your income – was still common. Today it is a measure that most of my

folk would consider antiquated and unrealistic. There are too many needs and too many other charitable opportunities. When you were first ordained, church was still the place to be on more than a weekly basis. While this is still the case for some, there is a very different landscape for others. Many see church as the place you go for your 3000 mile spiritual oil change.

The church is no longer relevant to society in the way it used to be. And this is a challenge for many of us in the church. While we know intellectually that the church has several times found new ways to be relevant throughout its two thousand year history, we grieve the church not being the same as it was in our parents and grandparents generations...and for most of us, even in our lifetimes. The truth is, we, as any institution have built up our entitlements. We have felt entitled to the prestige we were so long afforded in society. We have felt entitled to exclusivity on Sunday mornings. We have felt entitled to being a priority in the time people committed beyond family and work. And now that these entitlements no longer seem to hold true, even in our own lives, we grieve their loss.

Perhaps we have become like the people of Nineveh so preoccupied by what we've felt entitled to that we've stopped listening

to God's prophetic voice. Perhaps we've forgotten that Jesus call to disciples begins with leaving such entitlement behind.

I'll be honest Dad, I used to be somewhat resentful that pretty much my entire pastoral career will be spent in the time in the church's life between what has been and what will be...during this time of transition. But I've really come around on that. I now see it as a very exciting time. It is a time when we as a church can explore new ways to be relevant to society. It is a time when we are able to try out new models for ministry. It is a time when we can ground ourselves anew in the true legacy that we pass on to our children – not one of buildings or assets – but a legacy of faith that transforms lives.

Being in the church today is more than surviving a time of change and “letting go”. It is a time for learning again how to “follow” in the way the first disciples did.

Dad, the world has changed in a great many ways over the past twenty-five years. But I am convinced that there is one thing that has not changed and all. That is the relevance and necessity of God's word of love and grace. I still remember very well the only talk we ever had about my entering the ministry. You said, “Be sure. Be

sure of what you are doing, for you are not just trying to advance people's livelihoods or protect their lives. You are dealing with their very souls." I have never forgotten your words and I try to live by them every day. I know that there are many, many wounded souls in the world. If I accomplish anything in my career I hope it is that I help others become caretakers of souls. For it seems to me that for as much as the world has changed, our call from God is that same old one: "Go bring to others my word of love and bring healing to their wounded souls."

So yes Dad, the world has changed, but the work – the work God called you to, the work God called me to, the work God calls all of us to as disciples – that continues on. Amen.