Sunday, January 19, 1975
PURPOSEFUL FORGETTING
Genesis 19:24-26; Philippians 3:12-16

If a person is called “forgetful,” it is usually not meant as a compliment. Most of us are annoyed at our own forgetfulness and at the forgetfulness of others. But there is a kind of forgetting that is useful and positive. Our New Testament scripture lesson read earlier describes a “purposeful forgetting.”

The Apostle Paul tells us that in his own experience as a Christian, he finds it necessary to forget what lies behind and to go forward to what lies ahead. We are to press on toward the goal of the upward call of God. The Apostle is giving us advice about a Christian style of life — a living forward.

Now in telling us to forget what lies behind, does not mean that we are to forget all of the past. Over and over in the Bible, we are also told to “remember.” In fact, that’s largely what the Bible itself is, the remembering of people who knew God and who were called by God. In fact, the church has been defined as “the people of God remembering Jesus.

So, to forget what lies behind, does not mean that we are to remember nothing. It does not mean turning our minds into a blank. Total forgetting is an illness as much as total remembering.

An advertisement for a popular soft drink asks, “Don’t you want to be one of the” Now “people? It urges us to become one in the Now generation!

The only thing I can think of that is worse than being one of the Now people is being one of the Then people. To be a Now person means to be wholly concerned with the present and the immediate future; to be involved in fads, sensations, and the whole business of the newest, the latest, and what’s popular. It also means being insensitive to the past, to cut oneself off from the roots of tradition, to favor the sensory and the subjective over the rational and the real.

On the other hand, to be a Then person means to cling to the past for its own sake, to apply lessons that are not relevant today, to engage in a mixture of nostalgia, envy, rage, and fear toward what’s modern and to imagine that 20th century problems can be solved by 16th century moralism or 18th century politics or economics.

These are false alternatives, to be either a Now person or a Then person. There is a better way than either and that is to be an Always person, transcending both the frantic cult of the new and the feeble cult of the old. That is why as Christians, we are called to “purposeful forgetting” Christians, and “purposeful remembering.”

This means selecting from both the past and the present what is valuable and discarding what is useless or harmful which of course implies the ability to make judgments.

We’ve all met people who live too· much in the past, either remembering all the bad things that happened to them or remembering how good the past was and how evil and bad the •present is.

The point the Bible is trying to make is that we can carry excess baggage from the past into the present and this can load us down so much that we have no energy left for living in the present and no hope for the future. The past should teach, not tyrannize or completely rule us. It's one thing to ask, what can we learn from the past, but it's another thing to blindly say, we're going to do it that way because we've always done it that way.

Do you see the difference? Whatever in remembering gives you strength, blesses or guides and corrects you and leads you with openness into the future should be remembered. Whatever hinders you, bogs you down should be purposefully forgotten.

But now let's be more specific. What is some of the ex-cess baggage that most of us are prone to carry into the present which we should purposefully forget? And then we'll look at some of the things we need to remember.

1. First of all, forget the wrongs done to you by others. Forget the hates you have from the past and the hurts you have experienced. The Bible reminds us that "love does not keep a record of wrongs." But how many of us do keep an accounting of the hurts and the snubs that have come our way. We file them away in the hope that we will be able to retaliate, pay back in kind the person who hurt us.

I once knew someone who had even written down the wrongs done to him, the harsh words, the bitter resentful memories. At such and such a time this was done to me. He was keeping a record of wrongs, rehearsing the whole sad scene, and thus poisoning his life bit by bit. This is what holding grudges does to a person.

We recently saw this kind of wrong remembering when it was revealed that the White House kept an "enemies list." People who keep an enemies list have little time left for doing constructive work. Here is where we had better do some purposeful forgetting.

Also why do we remember so carefully that certain people are former mental patients, or former convicts. Again, we need as Christians to practice "purposeful forgetting," and see persons as they are today, not as what they used to be.

Purposeful forgetting is a part of being a Christian. Though we complain, "I can't forget!" we can forget more things than we realize. But we will only really forget wisely and well by refocusing into a new center and a new direction, by pressing forward.

We need to be like Snoopy the dog in a recent Peanuts cartoon strip. In the first frame, we see Snoopy feeling great and dancing; he is saying — "Sometimes I love life so much I can't express it."

In the next frame, still dancing, He says, "I feel I want to take the first person I meet into my arn1s and dance merrily through the streets."

In frame three, Snoopy meets Lucy, who is in a grumpy mood, and everything falls silent. But then in the fourth frame, Snoopy is dancing again and saying, "I feel that I want to take the second person I meet in my arms and dance merrily through the streets!"

Snoopy did not permit the grumpy moment to throw its limits on his joyous perspective. Rather, he pressed forward, forgetting the past.

2. Secondly., forget the bad decisions you have made in the past — those things which are now past and done which cannot be changed. So often I hear people say, “If only, I had decided another way five years ago, or five months ago, then my whole life would be different.” And they keep looking back and reliving again and again a tragic mistake.

Or a person will say, “If only I hadn’t changed jobs or sold my business, then everything would be all right.” Or “If only I had bought that stock when it was $2.00 a share, now I would be rich.” “Or if I had sold that stock when the market was high a year and a half ago.” And so it goes, people concentrate on what they consider their failures or mistakes and keep blaming themselves.

Purposeful forgetting means to put those things behind you and not look back. Certainly, we can learn something from these wrong decisions or mistakes, but we do not learn if we keep punishing ourselves with them by keeping them alive in our memories. Then we are only carrying around excess baggage which weighs us down and takes most of our energy. We cannot look forward if our head is always turned backward.

I was never a track runner, but I do know that the coaches tell those who run races never to look back while running. Rather the runner is to keep striving forward toward the goal. The Apostle Paul must’ve seen some runners in his time coming in at the end of a race, straining forward with utter concentration to reach victory.

Some years ago, a fine young man in Princeton University, who later became Mayor of Princeton, was the best high hurdler in the United States in his time and represented us at the Olympic games. He was running a beautiful race and was coming to the last hurdle when some onlooker, either thoughtlessly or deliberately shouted from the stands, “Look out behind you!” He nicked the hurdle, broke his stride, and lost the race.

3. Thirdly, purposeful forgetting means not looking back longingly at the past, wishing to remain there. There’s a story in the Old Testament about the danger of this kind of looking back. Abraham and his family along with Lot and his family had been warned to leave the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, because those cities were going to be destroyed for their wickedness. As they were leaving, Lot’s wife turned and looked back, and the Bible says she was turned into a pillar of salt. The story implies that she looked back longingly on her way of life there. She didn’t want to forget that part of her life. The deadliest looking back is that of the imagination which has become so entangled in sinful associations which it cannot willingly let go and forget.

Lot’s wife is representative of all of those in every time who are caught in the consequences of the evil they cannot quite let go. It is not enough to turn the back tentatively upon old temptations; there must be a clean, full break. There must be purposeful forgetting.

While we are to purposefully forget some things if we are to go forward with courage and hope, there are also some things we are to remember which will undergird us and help carry us forward.

1. First of all, remember always the sovereignty of God. Remember too that God is faithful. The creeds and statements of faith of the Church are “remembering” statements. Turn now to the back of your hymnbooks and we will say together the Statement of Faith because it summarizes what we are to remember as Christians.

RECITE STATEMENT OF FAITH

2. Secondly, remember that if God is for us, who can be against us. As the Apostle Paul put it, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ, shall tribulation, or distress or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all of these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

3. As Christians we can practice purposeful forgetting because of what we have to remember. Amen.