Sunday, February 6, 1977
ROOTS
Deuteronomy 6:4-9,20-25; I Peter 2:9-10

When the final episode of the 8-day long television series, “Roots” ended last Sunday night, millions of Americans had seen another side of some of our own history. Furthermore, the way in which Mr. Alex Haley, the author of “Roots’1 searched for his own past and came to know it reminds us of some important things about the Bible, how it came into being, and how important remembering the past is for all of us.

So, this morning in the sermon, we’re not going to talk so much about the content of the story “Roots” as we are about what it tells us about ourselves, our faith, and how learning the past and remembering it can be helpful to us in the present and in the future.

1. First of all, the book and T. V. version of “Roots” reminds us of the importance of oral history, history which is told and passed on by word of mouth from generation to generation. All very early history is oral history and even since we human beings have learned how to write things down, oral history continues alongside written history.

All of us know stories about our family which were never written down. In the story of Roots, all Alex Haley had to begin with were a few statements of oral history which had been passed on to him through many generations. This oral history consisted of a few African words and. phrases, the name of his African ancestor who had been captured by slave traders — Kunta Kinte, the fact that Kunta Kinte had told his daughter Kizzie how he had been captured and asked her to remember these things and pass them on, along with some African words. He also told his daughter how and why half his foot had been cut off.

He had been captured, he told his daughter, when one day he had gone into the woods to find a tree to make a drum. Tell your descendants. Never let them forget. I was a Mandinka warrior. For out of the memory of the past comes strength for the present and hope for the future.

All this reminds me of the Bible. Over and over in the Old Testament, the people of Israel are told to remember their past and tell their children. “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart, and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise.”

“When your son asks you in the time to come, ‘What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the ordinances which the Lord our God has commanded you?’ Then you shall say to your son, ‘We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand, and he brought us out from. there and the Lord commanded us to do all these things.'”

Remember, remember, remember, and pass it on to your descendants. Tell the story to your children.

2. But why is remembering so important? Remembering is important because the past is useful in the present. We are all molded· from the events of the past and by what we

remember. Where we come from, where our roots are, what's happened to us and to our ancestors, tells us something about ourselves.

Most'of us, however, do not tell our children enough stories about our own ancestors or about the ancestors of our faith and vie are the poorer for it. Perhaps most of us do not know the stories ourselves.

If we are to be fully human, if we are to be truly human beings, we need three dimensions in our lives, past, present, and future. If any single one of them is lacking, life becomes fouled up and devoid of all kinds of meanings it could otherwise have.

There are many people who have no sense or knowledge of the past and try to live only in the present. Kunta Kinte didn't want this to happen to his descendants, for then after a while life becomes empty, the present is devoid of meaning — we ask "Why am I here? Where did I come from? Who am I?" These are all questions which our past tells us, and a sense of the past helps define to some extent who we are.

There are some people, of course, who try to live only in the past, and that's usually the immediate past. Then they miss the present and have no hope for the future. All they want to do is turn back the clock to things as they used to be. Many of the slaveowners were in this category.

There are still others among us who have a past but no future, and then, too, the present is empty. This was true of some of the slaves in Roots. They had no hope of ever being free in the future, their children were often sold from them and thus they had no future even through the lives of their children. For them it was like being in prison with a life sentence and no possibility of parole or ever getting out. Thus, the future was empty and with no future even the present was robbed of much of its meaning.

Then some of us can make the mistake of only trying to live in the future. The person who continually says, "I can't wait until tomorrow, or next week, or next year," is thinking so much about the future that he or she completely misses the joy of the present and has no use or learns nothing from the past at all.

So, we need all three dimensions — past, present and future, and our own knowledge of the past, what we remember and what we are taught to remember, the stories which are passed on to us are very important. Know your story and tell your story.

I think a pretty good case can be made for the fact that the persons who most often get into serious trouble in our society are those who have no sense of their roots. They do not know who they are or who they are connected to. And because they have no roots, they have no foundation.

One of the biggest mistakes we as immigrants made when we came to this country and in subsequent years was to destroy to a large degree the cultural heritage of the native Americans, the people to whom we -g.ye the name "Indian." Much of what we did, not allowing them to use their native language in schools, taking them from the lands of their tribal ancestors, and more caused them to lose their sense of roots. And many of them are now just beginning to regain that. We are also the poorer for it, for the heritage and culture of the native Americans has much to teach us.

A person without roots, who doesn't know his or her past is almost always a person in trouble.

On the other hand, when one does know the story of his heritage, then the.re is strength for the present. In our own city of Lincoln and the state of Nebraska and now nationwide, a large part of the strength and dignity of the German people who came here from Russia, comes from. the fact that they have always remembered their roots and have kept their story alive. From the memory of their past has come meaning in the present and hope for the future.

So, it should be for all of us as Christians. Our religious story begins with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the Old Testament, and continues on up through Jesus Christ, the Apostles, and on and on. We need to know this story as well as our own family history and from it comes a sense of place, a sense of belonging, a sense of being connected. From our past our own roots and without roots we are we get like a tree or plant without roots, we dry up, or the wind comes along, and we have no strength to stand.

3. Note thirdly, that the story of "Roots" reminds us that the good always wins out eventually. "The wheels of the gods grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine." We are not always aware of this slow grinding in the present, and we often fight it or oppose it, but God is still working.

As we look back at events, then we can often see the mistakes we have made. Many who watched "Roots" were surprised at the cruelty, the prejudice, the blindness, the greed, and wondered how it could've happened.

And yet 100 years later during the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s, there was the same kind of blindness, cruelty, and prejudice. It was almost as difficult to end segregation as it was to end slavery. And it's still not over. Even though we often know what's right, we resist it. Very few people give up their power over others voluntarily.

There is a scene from a novel which describes what is often the case in society. The scene takes place on the sky balcony of a large hotel. A band is playing, and people are dancing and celebrating. At a table are four people playing bridge. One of the men has the dummy hand. He places it on the table, walks over to the balcony rail and looks far down to the street before him. Drifting lazily out of the basement window, a tiny whisper of smoke can be seen. He lights a cigarette and when he has finished it, crushes it on the floor, walks into the dancing couples and dances with a beautiful woman. He returns to the bridge table and during the course of the game, he has again a dummy hand. Again, he goes to the balcony, lights a cigarette and gazes downward. This time he sees flames lashing out the fifth story window. He calmly finishes the cigar-ette, walks onto the dance floor, dances another dance and once more returns to the bridge table. The next time he walks to the balcony rail the flames are leaping over it and his eyebrows are buried-. At the same time there is a era.sh at tl1.e door, tl1e firemen break down the door and shout, "Ladies and gentlemen, are you mad?"

So, it is for us. Even though the flames are almost upon us, we are oblivious to what's happening. We turn and walk away and continue as if nothing could happen to des-troy our neat little setup. While we were in the middle of slavery, very few people, particularly those most deeply involved saw the evil in it and it took the hell and agony of a civil war to end it, and even then, we continued with "Jim Crow laws" and segregation.

But our injustice to one another cannot last forever. The blacks knew it and some others knew it. But most people simply closed their eyes. "We shall overcome," was the song of the civil

rights movement. And it continues to happen. But so many of us drag our feet and some even put on white sheets and believe they can stop it from happening through fear. and intimidation. Others use other methods. But in the end, it's to no avail. God's justice cannot be stopped.

Can it happen again? Yes! Perhaps not in the same way, but the struggle to stop our inhumanity to one another is a constant one. Even now in various places in our civilized world, torture is regularly used in an attempt to control and manipulate human beings. Political prisoners are held and killed. Just 32 years ago, World War II ended and with it the mass slaughter of the Jewish people. It can happen again and almost anywhere.

So, books and TV programs like Roots are important because they remind us of what we human beings often do to each other. And we need to be reminded, lest we forget. If you're ever in Jerusalem, visit the memorial which has been built there in memory of 6,000,000 Jews who died as result of the Nazi terror. You will be sickened by the actual photographs of the death camps, the gas ovens, the corpses, and the mass graves, just as we were sickened at times when we saw certain scenes in the T.V. series, Roots.

But we need to be reminded again and again because racism is not dead, prejudice is still all around us. There are still churches in this country where blacks cannot be received into membership.

4. At the same time, Roots also reminds us of the dignity of human beings and our progress in race relations. The fact that the T.V. series was shown and watched by millions of persons, black and white is a good sign. And above all it's a story of hope. Black people are more and more a part of our society. It is significant, for example, that our new ambassador to the United Nations is a black man, Andrew Young.

Victor Frankl who endured and survived the Nazi concentration camps as a Jew reminds us that "Man is a creature who created the gas chambers of Buchenwald and Auschwitz, but man is also that creature who entered the gas chambers with the Shema Israel or the Lord's Prayer on his lips." In Roots, we saw the cruelty of human beings, but we also saw the dignity. We saw what human beings can become in spite of our treatment of them and we're still seeing it as black people enter more and more into leadership positions. Amen.