Sunday, August 26, 1984
HISTORY NEED NOT REPEAT ITSELF
Matthew 6:24-34

Most of us are familiar with the saying: “History always repeats itself.” Not being an historian, I have no expert knowledge as to whether this is true in any way or not. I’m certain that at times we all have had the feeling that it seems like history is repeating itself at least to some degree — that what has happened before is happening again.

In our individual lives, some of us certainly feel that history has a way of repeating itself, particularly when we find ourselves making the same mistake over and over again. Then sometimes we begin to believe that the past will continue to repeat itself in the present and in the future without the possibility of change.

To put it another way, some of us or maybe many of us, live too much in the past, either regretting it, or idolizing it. If we have regrets about the past and we hold on to them as well as hold on to and invest in and become attached to our guilty experiences, our mistakes, our grievances, our resentments, and out anxieties from the past, then we are tempted to predict a similar future, and the future doesn’t look very good. All we can then see is a fearful world and we are overly anxious about the future.

If on the other hand, we idolize the past, then all we can talk about is the good old days and we’re certain that nothing can ever equal them. Then we want history to repeat itself, but are sure it won’t. And again, we find ourselves worrying excessively about the future because we’re sure it can never be that good. Thus, there are many people who are “anxious about tomorrow,” as Jesus put it in the Sermon on the Mount. We tend to live between the “if only’s” of the past and/or the “what if’s” of the future and in the process lose the most precious time of all — the present!

So, this morning I want to talk about some ways to live more appreciatively and more delightfully in thee present. This does not mean of course that we totally ignore the past. There’s a lot to be learned from our past mistakes and our past successes, as well as the mistakes and successes of others. Nor does it mean that we ignore the future. Planning for the future can be a most regarding endeavor. But most important of all is that we learn to live as fully as possible in the present. That’s when Jesus was talking about when he said — “Do not be anxious about your life — and do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself.” Do not re-occupy the past, nor pre-occupy the future. Live in the present. How then as Christians do we do this?

1. First of all, to live as fully as possible in the present, we have to let go of any resentments, grievances, hate, and guilt feelings. We have to forgive others and receive God’s forgiveness. Otherwise we remain tied to the past. We don’t need to carry around all this excess baggage from the past. It’s a heavy load which keeps up from living fully in the present.

One way of letting go of such things which keep us in the past is simply to remember — now is the only time there is! Pain, grief, depression, guilt, and other forms of fear begin to disappear when the mind and spirit are focused in <u>loving peace</u> in this instant.

Many of us think that we are aware of the present and it is true that most of us do see objects and hear the sounds that surround us. But notice I said we are to focus in loving peace in this instant, in the present, and when we do everything changes.

I know that it helps me to keep reminding myself that the present, now, is the most important time there is. And sometimes this is difficult to do because there is usually a tremendous preoccupation with the past and future when we are suffering from illness or pain of any kind. We are tempted to look at all our past misery and wonder how long we are now going to have to endure this. And when we are hurting in any way, it often feels like no one is loving us. Furthermore, when the present is painful, it is natural to want to escape this pain or hurt as soon as possible.

Here's a story I came across the other day which illustrates this point. A physician was asked to see a woman in her late fifties who had cancer of the brain. When he arrived at her home, he first spent some time with Ed, h husband. Ed told the physician that his family had been fortunate because no one had ever been seriously ill prior to this. So, it was quite a shock when his wife was diagnosed as having cancer. She had been operated on, but the cancer was not removable. Despite chemotherapy and X-ray treatment, the prognosis was guarded.

Ed said that he had come from a poor family with many children. When he was seven years old there wasn't enough food to feed everyone and he pledged himself that this would never happen to his family when he grew up. As a young man, he went into business for himself, worked long hours and was rarely home. His wife had raised their two children largely by herself. Ed became quite wealthy; his son joined him in the business, and life seemed satisfactory until his wife became ill. When that happened, he decided, for the first time in their marriage, to spend more time at home.

One day their gardener said to him, "one of the rose bushes in the garden looks like it has died. Is it all right if I pull it out and replace it?" Ed thought for a moment, then said he would like to see it. As he stood looking down at the bush, it occurred to him that he had one of the loveliest rose gardens in the city, yet in the last 20 years, he had never taken time to enjoy it.

"Don't pull it out. It is alive and I would like to care for it myself," Ed told the gardener. Daily he visited the garden to love, nourish, and water the rosebush. It began to come back to life, and several weeks later a beautiful rose appeared. Ed snipped it off and took it to his wife.

Because of how he chose to respond to his wife's illness, Ed was not able to realize how much of life he had let pass him by. He had been so preoccupied with accumulating more money for the future that he had forgotten to live in the present. Now he resolved that he was going to do his best to live int eh present.

After hearing the story of the rosebush, the physician talked with the wife. He asked what was going on in her life before she developed cancer; had there been any stress preceding the onset? She said, "No, she and her husband and children had been perfectly happy." A few minutes later however, tears came to her eyes and she related something else.

She said that when her husband Ed had first gone into business twenty-five years ago, her brother became his partner. The following year Ed bought her brother's share of the business, but the brother felt he had not received enough money in the financial arrangement and hadn't spoken to either of them since.

She went onto say that she loved both her brother and her husband, but felt loyalty to her husband. Through the intervening years, she had a nagging sense of guilt that she should resolve the conflict. She was depressed about the situation — but had never talked about it until now. The physician explained to her how important he thought it was for her to resolve this. Otherwise she might have some ambivalence about ever being happy again because she would know she would still have to face a life situation that she found painful. They talked about forgiveness, not only between her brother and husband, but also for herself. She then gave the physician permission to bring in her husband and to speak with both of them about the situation.

Ed had not been aware that his wife was feeling such deep conflict over this situation for all these years. So, he immediately went to the phone to call her brother and ask forgiveness. The next day there was a reconciliation.

Both Ed and his wife were not fully living in the present until that reconciliation. Now their relationship began to bloom like the rose on the plant that had seemed dead and for the remaining months that the wife lived, they were immeasurably happier.

To live peacefully and happily in the present is so very simple that when we first become aware of it, we stand in disbelief at all the things we put ourselves through before. To live int eh present, we have to let go of the excess baggage of the past.

2. Secondly, to live fully in the present, we have to let go of fear, or what Jesus called “anxiousness.” Whenever we fear the future or the present, we are hesitant to do anything without considering all the consequences — all the implications. And since it is impossible to do anything without it having some consequences — because we live in an inter-connected world, anxiety accompanies even the smallest events of each day.

What our Christian faith teaches is that we are never in a position to see the total outcome of anything we do. We can never totally and accurately predict the future — and furthermore we know that all the worry in the world will not control the future. All worry does is use up our energy.

3. Thirdly, to live as fully as possible in the present means to place one’s ultimate trust in God and God’s goodness and grace. God’s loving care for us is not dependent on anything we do or do not do. God’s loving care is constant and is forever. As St. Paul put it in his letter to the romans — “If God is for us, who can be against us?

Use the present; live in the present; delight in each present moment! Don’t’ confine yourself to the past or the future. Will Rogers used to say, “never let yesterday use up too much of today. In the scripture reading for today Jesus said, “Never let tomorrow use up too much of today.”

Furthermore, our Christian faith reminds us that God is continually making all things new. God’s creation is not static. God’s creation is not circular — and in that sense history does not repeat itself. History only seems to repeat itself when we bring our past mistakes into the present instead of letting them go, or when we worry so much about the future that we immobilize ourselves in the present.

Our faith says — take time out to enjoy and appreciate the present. Certainly, that’s the reason that one of the ten commandments tells us to take at least one day of rest out of seven — one

day when we do not hurry and scurry about as if the future of the world depended on our busyness. To be able to take a day of rest is a sign that one does ultimately trust God.

But we need more than just one day of rest in seven. We need to take moments of rest; little time outs when we make ourselves totally conscious of the present moment; totally conscious and aware of God's presence.

This morning as you leave this place of worship, go in joy and with the resolve that you are not longer going to let the mistakes of the past control you, nor the fear of the future; rather you are going to trust more in God's love and power and savor more of the beauty of life in the present. Amen.