Sunday, December 31, 1989
SOME THINGS TO FORGET
Genesis 19:24-26; Philippians 3:12-16; Luke 9:57-62

When a person is called “forgetful,” it is usually not meant as a compliment. Most of us are annoyed with our own forgetfulness and with the forgetfulness of others. But there is a kind of forgetting that is useful and positive. Our New Testament scripture lessons read earlier all describe a necessary and 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 way of life — a living forward. In a similar fashion, in a story recorded in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus reminds those who want to follow him that it is necessary to leave some things behind in order to go forward. And then he adds, “No one who puts his or her hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God.”

In telling us to forget and to leave some things behind, both Jesus and the Apostle Paul do not mean to imply that we are to forget all of the past. In fact, over and over in the Bible we are told to “remember.” That’s largely what the Bible itself is — the remembering of people who knew God and who were called by God. 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 some time ago urged the consumer to become one of the “Now” people and to be part of the “Now” generation.

The only thing I can think of that is worse than being a totally “Now” person is being a totally “Then” person. To be a “Now” person means to be wholly concerned with the present, to be involved in fads, sensations, and the whole business of the newest, the latest, and what’s popular. To be a completely “Now” person is to be insensitive to the past, to have no concern for history, to cut oneself off from the roots of tradition.

On the other hand, to be a totally “Then” person would mean to cling to the past for its own sake, to live completely in the past, to engage in a mixture of nostalgia, envy, rage, and fear toward what’s modern, to be afraid of and opposed to all change, and to imagine that 20th Century problems can be solved by 16th Century moralism or 18th Century politics or economics.

The story is told of a woman who purchased a piece of needlework that contained, as part of the design, the words, “PRAYER CHANGES THINGS.” Proud of her choice, she took it home and hung it above the fireplace in the family room. Several days later, she noticed that it was missing, and by questioning her husband, found that he was the one who had taken it down. She asked him if it disturbed him because he did not believe in the power of prayer. He responded by saying, “No, it’s not that. I believe in prayer. In fact, I believe that prayer changes things. I just don’t happen to like change, so I took it down.”

Some people, because they are afraid of and don't like change of any kind, live completely in the past.

These are false alternatives, to be either a "Now" person or a "Then" person. There is a better way, 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 practice "purposeful forgetting" and "purposeful remembering."

What we need to be able to do is select from the past and the present what is valuable, and discard and leave behind what is useless or harmful. This means we need the ability to distinguish between what is holding us back and what is useful in both the past and the present.

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 that both Jesus and Paul were making is that we can and do 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 we can learn from the past, which will keep us from making mistakes in the present and in the future, but it's another thing to say that we're doing 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, corrects you, and leads you with hope into the future is to be remembered. Whatever hinders you, bogs you down, interferes with healthy relationships with others and with God, needs to be confessed, forgiven, and then purposefully left behind.

But now let's be more specific. What are some of the pieces of excess baggage that too many of us are prone to carry into the present, which we should purposefully leave behind? This is particularly important as we begin the new year 1990.

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. We are told in Paul's first letter to the Church in Corinth that "love does not keep a record of wrongs." But how many of us do keep an accounting of the hurts and snubs that have come our way? We file them away in the hope that we will be able to retaliate, to pay back in kind the person who hurt us.
I once knew someone who kept a written record of every wrong he thought had been done to him — the harsh words said to him, when someone had been less than respectful, all the bitter resentful memories. He kept rehearsing the whole sad scene and thus poisoned his life bit by bit. This is what holding grudges does to a person.

Some years ago, we became aware of this wrong kind of 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. There are some things we need to forget and leave behind.

Also, why do we remember so carefully that certain people are former mental patients or former convicts? What a person has been in the past needs to be forgotten. As Christians, we need to practice "purposeful forgetting," so that we can see people as they are today, not as what they might have been in the past.

As we begin the new year, there are many things that are best forgotten and left behind. Then we can begin in a fresh way. Leave behind impossible expectations, mistakes, failures, and wrong assumptions.

Purposeful forgetting is a part of being a Christian. Though we sometimes complain and say, “I can’t forget,” we can forget more things than we realize. But we will only truly 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 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 arms 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 presses forward, forgetting the past.

Secondly, forget and leave behind the bad decisions you have made in the past — those things that are now past and done and 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 regretting over and over a decision made, and it immobilizes them from moving forward.
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 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.

Some things are best forgotten and left behind. Certainly, we can learn a lot from these wrong decisions and mistakes, but we do not learn from them if we keep punishing ourselves by keeping them alive in our memories. Then we are carrying excess baggage that 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 the race. Rather, the runner is to keep striving forward toward the finish line. The Apostle Paul must have seen some runners in his time crossing the finish line, having kept their eyes forward with utter concentration to reach victory. Was it Satchel Paige who said, “Never look back, someone might be gaining on you"?

Some years ago, a young man at 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 good 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.

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 story 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 leave that part of her life behind.
Lot's wife is representative of all of those people in every time who are caught in the consequences of evil which they cannot quite let go. It is not enough to turn back in only a tentative way from old temptations — there must be a clean, full break. There are some things we need to forget.

There was a minister who was simply known as Preacher Gordon, who served a Presbyterian Church in Florida. He was much loved and respected, and he was especially known for his sharp wit and his gift for the quick comeback. Preacher Gordon never married, and consequently became the object of the attention of a number of the older women in the congregation. Reportedly, a team would go to the parsonage every Monday to do his laundry and cleaning.

One of his women admirers moved away and was gone for several years. Then one Sunday, she showed up in church. After the service, she did what no one should ever do to any minister — she grabbed his hand and said expectantly, "Preacher, I bet you've forgotten my name." With a wink, and not so much as a pause, he said, "Darling, I had to forget your name in order to get on with my work." For each of us, if we are to follow Jesus, there are some things we need to forget if we are going to get on with our work.

Here's a suggestion for the new year of 1990: Whether or not you've made any New Year's resolutions, make a list of those things you need to leave behind, those things that would better be forgotten. Then take the list, tear it up, or burn it. Amen.