Sunday, January 21, 1990
SOME THINGS TO REMEMBER, PART II
John 15:1-8

In the previous two sermons, we looked at two very human and important abilities: forgetting or having the capacity to leave things behind, and our ability to remember. Both are crucial to our living as human beings and as Christians. Unless we have amnesia, it is impossible to forget everything, and it is also not possible to remember everything, at least at a conscious level.

This means that all of us are necessarily selective in what we forget and what we remember, although not always consciously so. We know that some of us remember and hang on to grudges, hates, regrets, mistakes, and resentments much longer than is healthy. The phrase, "if only," is too much a part of our vocabulary.

We frequently remember the wrong things and thus keep punishing ourselves and others when it is not necessary or helpful to anyone. Have you noticed that many of us carry too much excess baggage, which weighs us down and takes most of our energy? For example, there are people we need to forgive so that we can get on with our lives. We also need to forgive ourselves so that we can get on with our lives. Our Christian faith reminds us that God has already forgiven us before we ask. All we have to do is accept that forgiveness. God does not hold grudges.

The point is we have to be consciously selective in what we need to forget and what we need to remember. Thus, I suggested in the two previous sermons that we make a list of what we need to forget and then destroy that list. I also suggested it is helpful for people who profess to follow Jesus to make a list of things we need to remember, especially God's promises; to keep that list, memorize it, and review it from time to time and add to it. In last Sunday's sermon, I gave you part of my own personal list of what has been helpful for me to remember as a follower of Jesus.

In today's sermon, I want to continue our discussion of things we need to remember as followers of Jesus. Whereas last week's sermon dealt primarily with things we need to remember as individual Christians, today's sermon will be dealing more with things we need to remember as a community of Christians. The church is, above all, a community of memory. As I said last week, it is the people of God remembering Jesus. Over and over again in the Bible, we are told to remember: "Remember the Lord your God is one God, and you shall love God with all your heart and mind and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

A common memory is, in large part, what creates a community. In Lincoln, for example, we have the national headquarters of the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia. This society was formed because of the common memory of a group of people from Germany who, at one time in the past, emigrated to Russia and from there, to this country. The society was formed in order to keep alive that heritage and that memory. One reason I emphasize regular attendance and participation in worship as Christians is because it helps us to remember who we are as a Church and as individuals.

What then are some of the things we need to remember as the Church of Jesus Christ?

We Need to Remember That We Are the Inheritors of a Long Tradition of Faith. We did not invent the faith — it has been given to us. We did not invent the Church or produce the Bible.

Some people talk about God and the Bible as if they are the only ones who truly know God and the only ones who know what the Bible is all about. We are not the first to have an experience of God, and we will not be the last.
A speaker, which both John Smeltzer and I heard last week at a ministers' meeting, had a very specific suggestion for us ministers and our remembering. He said we should each buy a copy of the Old Testament written in Hebrew as it originally was, and a copy of the Greek New Testament as it was originally written, and then keep both of these open on our desk and let them sit there and look at us as we work with our English translations of the Bible — not because we need to be able to read Hebrew and Greek, but to remind us that the Bible has a long, long history and was given to us by countless faithful people in both the Hebrew and Christian traditions. It is filled with sacred memories.

We Need to Remember That Jesus Is the Vine, and We Are the Branches. Jesus is the center of the Church, not us.
A vine and its branches are good metaphors because they remind us of some very important things. If, as branches, we do not stay connected to the vine, we wither and die. Unless churches like this one stay close and connected to the source, the vine — God — we become nothing more than another social club or gathering of people. On the other hand, when we gather here for worship as a branch of the true vine, this is not just another meeting of another group. We are a part of the body of Christ. We trace our history all the way back to the Old Testament, to Abraham and Sarah. Our purpose is the "increase among people of the love of God and neighbor."

Unfortunately, sometimes individual congregations forget what they are for, and then that local church dies. The group — as a social organization — may live on for a long time, but it is no longer a church, only a gathering of individuals.

In the book of Revelation, there is a death notice, an obituary about the death of the church in a city named Sardis, and the cause of death is listed as amnesia. The church has forgotten. It is dead because of loss of memory. It did not remember what it was for. It forgot its purpose. It forgot the tradition all the way from the Old Testament up through Jesus. It forgot Jesus was the vine and it was a branch. Cause of death: amnesia!

Another thing to remember about branches is that they are not only there to stay connected to the vine, but they are also to bear fruit. Jesus warns us in his statement about vines and branches that those branches which do not bear fruit are to be cut off and gathered and thrown into the fire and burned. A branch that no longer bears fruit, in other words, is useless — it is as good as dead.

What are some of the fruits of the Gospel we are to bear? They are such things as I think we in this church are doing — reaching out to the homeless; visiting the sick; feeding the hungry; reaching out through television and radio with the Good News that God loves them to people who cannot be here in person; providing a chaplain to the inmates in the county jail so that the Good News of God's love can be heard there. We are to be healers and lovers.

Last week, I heard a story about a church that forgot what a church is for. It was a small, beautiful little church that hadn't grown much for a number of years — a comfortable place. Then it was announced that a new large industry was going to locate in that town, and pretty soon, all the apartments and mobile home parks were filled. The minister, who had been there for about six months, was delighted. Here was a chance for the church to reach out in its ministry. But the congregation was not delighted. The leaders said they didn't know these

people, and most of the newcomers would probably not be there very long anyway. They weren't at all interested in being open to these outsiders. Finally, the congregation voted that only people who were property owners in the county could become members. That church was dead and didn't know it. It forgot what the church was for. The minister didn't last long there after that.

Years later, the minister was in that vicinity and wanted to show his wife the little church he had served before he was married. At first, he had trouble finding the building because the community had grown so much. When he did find it, he noticed the parking lot had been expanded and it was filled with cars. He was amazed and wondered what had happened. Then he noticed the sign that said, "Barbecue — Fish, Chicken, Pork, Beef — All You Can Eat, $4.99." He went into the building and it was filled with people — eating barbecue. Where the Communion Table had been, there was a Dairy Queen machine. He especially noted that now the place was filled with all sorts of people, many of whom would not have been welcome there when it had called itself a church.

But when a church remembers its history, its tradition, remembers that Jesus is the vine and it is a branch, remembers that it is the body of Christ, then amazing things can and do happen.

Did you see the story in the January 1st issue of Time Magazine about a congregation and its pastor in Romania? The fall of the Ceausescu regime in Romania was sparked by the faithful witness of that congregation and its pastor.

In the city of Timisoara in the western, predominantly Hungarian area, the Rev. Lazlo Tokes dared to speak the truth. His story and that of his congregation is one of faithfulness and courage. Last summer, in an interview with Hungarian television, Lazlo Tokes spoke out against Ceausescu's plan of "systemization," which called for the destruction of 8,000 villages and the forced relocation of over 50,000 ethnic Hungarians. Because of his stand, Tokes' ration book was taken from him and he was unable to buy bread, meat, or fuel. When parishioners brought food, the secret police harassed them. His phone was turned off, and occasionally on again, to allow the police to make threatening calls.

Unable to break Lazlo Tokes' resolve through intimidation and to force him to sign a retraction, four masked men broke into his home in November. They beat him and his pregnant wife. He was saved from death when two friends happened in and scared off the attackers.

His bishop, Lazlo Papp, a puppet of the Communist regime appointed by Ceausescu, tried to force him to another parish, but in defiance, Tokes affirmed the autonomy of his local church. Unless his consistory voted him out, he said, he would not leave. With that, the secret police rounded up the consistory, taking them from their places of work. They killed the chief elder and at gunpoint, made the consistory vote out their pastor.

When news of this spread throughout the city, on December 16th, a human chain of parishioners and supporters gathered around the parsonage to protect Tokes. They brought their children and placed them at the front of the crowd in the belief that surely the soldiers would not harm the children.

When the army refused to fire on the crowd, the secret police killed the officers in charge, and then, turning their guns on the crowd, opened fire on the row of children, as well as their parents and neighbors. Over 2,000 men, women, and children were killed. Tokes was taken

into custody, but as news of the massacre spread, Romanians throughout the country joined the protest that eventually ended Ceausescu's tyranny.

Incidentally, The Wall Street Journal pointed out in an editorial this week that even though Nicolae Ceausescu has been tried and executed, we need, as United States citizens, to remember that for 15 years our government supported the "butchers of Bucharest." The editorial said that our State Department owes an apology to the Romanian people and to David Funderburk.

As the U.S. Ambassador to Romania from 1981 to 1985, Mr. Funderburk came to oppose our official U.S. policy, but no one listened to him. Instead, for years, U.S. officials treated Ceausescu like a great statesman. At home, meanwhile, Ceausescu was razing churches and whole villages, jailing and shooting dissidents, selling emigrants for cash, according to The Wall Street Journal. Mr. Funderburk, on the other hand, received Washington's scorn and left town.

Now that Romanians have torn the Communist imagery from their flag, few Americans seem to remember the old U.S. policy. We suspect most Romanians do, though; they've just made Mr. Funderburk the chairman of an international Romanian relief fund.

There are times when the church goes about its business of being the church, when it works at keeping freedom alive, there are those who are going to be hostile to it, try to stop it, and even kill in the attempt. We've seen it in El Salvador, Nicaragua, South Africa, Romania, Poland, East Germany, Russia, and in our own country. Remember, on January 15, we commemorated the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. The world and people sometimes hate the Gospel of Jesus Christ and those who try to live it because it runs counter to so many of the values we now hold. The Gospel is often countercultural, and people don't like that. We remember that Jesus was crucified because his presence and preaching were profoundly unsettling to reigning religious and political groups.

But remember above all else, the good news is that God is found in the courage of the church and in individuals who stand up for freedom and human dignity, no matter what the odds. "If God is for us, who can be against us?" Do you believe this? Amen.