Sunday, January 8, 1995
FORGETTING AND REMEMBERING
Isaiah 61:1-4; Luke 3:15-17,21-22

Since we are still in the first month of the New Year, this sermon is about forgetting and remembering. Our Christian faith emphasizes both activities. There are some things we need to forget and leave behind as we move forward, not only in this new year of 1995, but also as we travel through life's journey.

Forgetting and remembering are also important because things are not always as they appear with people. Outwardly, most of you look like people who are at peace with yourselves and with the world. But suppose you came to this worship service as God sees you. Suppose you let your outer appearance reflect the inner reality of your lives. I wonder how some of you would be dressed.

Some months ago, on a Sunday morning, I received an unsigned note, probably written by someone wearing their Sunday-best clothes and a Sunday-best smile, which said on the outside that everything was all right, yet the inner reality of that person's life was quite different. The note said, "Otis, I believe there is some passage in the Bible about God's promise to never give us more than we can bear. Lately, I've been feeling that I can't stay strong enough through one more problem. I always ask for (and receive) the strength to go on, but it's so wearing. Can you give me some suggestions on things to forget and things to remember so that I can have the strength to endure?"

Perhaps you've felt that way. There are times when we don't know how we can go on, or why we should even try. We are sometimes told that burdens are actually blessings in disguise, but if you are the one carrying the burden, you are likely to agree with Churchill, who said, "It may be a blessing in disguise, but if so, it's a very effective disguise."

Before I talk more specifically about things to forget and things to remember as we face life's problems as Christians and therefore have the strength to endure, I must tell you that I do not know any passage in the Bible that even remotely suggests that God promises to never give us more than we can bear. And frankly, I am relieved. If that were true, those of us who can bear the most would also have the most trouble in life. Furthermore, I find it extremely difficult to think of God as adding burdens to our lives until we reach the breaking point and then stopping, like a hard and cruel farmer who is determined to get the most out of a beast of burden. The God that Jesus revealed is not in the business of making life more difficult for us, because life can be difficult enough on its own. We'll return to this issue later in the sermon when we talk about some things we need to remember about God.

Some years ago, Judith Viorst wrote a book called Necessary Losses. She makes the point that forgetting, leaving behind, and loss are all part of life. Losses are universal, unavoidable, inexorable, and even necessary because we grow by losing, leaving behind, and letting go. The road of human development is paved with things that were best left behind.

For us as Christians, the beginning of a new year can be a good time to assess our losses and to distinguish between those things it is necessary to forget and leave behind and those things which are helpful to remember. It's what the Bible calls "purposeful forgetting." Jesus reminded those who wanted to follow him and his way that it would be necessary to leave some things

behind and to forget them. He said, for example, “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, Jesus did not mean to imply that we are to forget all of the past. There are also many things in life that are worth remembering. They are what give us the courage and energy to live in the present and to face the future. Over and over again in the Bible we are also told to “remember.” That’s largely what the Bible is, the remembering of people who knew God and were called by God. The Christian Church can be defined as “the people of God remembering Jesus.”

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 totally a “now” person is being completely a “then” person. To be a “now” person in the extreme means to be only 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 means that one would 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 anything new, and to be opposed to all change.

A woman 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, in 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 answered, “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.”

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 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, then, are some things we need to forget and some things we need to remember as we enter this new year of 1995?

First of all, forget the wrongs done to you by others. Forget the grudges you are holding 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.” If you feel that someone has neglected you or let you down, forgive that person and forget the neglect.

Second, forget and leave behind the bad decisions you have made in the past, those things which are now done and gone 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 keeps them from moving on.

Certainly, it is true that we can learn a lot from our mistakes of the past, but we do not learn from them if we keep punishing ourselves by keeping them alive in our memories. We also use up a lot of life's energy in the process. Discover what you can learn from your mistakes and then forget them.

Third, purposeful forgetting means not looking back too longingly at the past, wishing to remain there. Remember that story in the Old Testament about the danger 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.

This is only a beginning list of some things to forget and leave behind as you enter this new year. There will undoubtedly be other things you want to add on your own.

Now, as followers of the way of Jesus, let's look at some helpful things to remember as we enter this new year and every new year.

First, remember God never adds burdens to your life. As I said earlier in this sermon, God is not in the business of making life more difficult for us because life is difficult on its own.

When Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the young German theologian, was in prison and eventually executed for his role in the plot to overthrow Hitler, he wrote to one of his friends from his prison cell that his ordeal convinced him that life does not give us more than we can handle this day.

Note that Bonhoeffer did not suggest that God was responsible for what happened to him. God did not send Hitler or cause Bonhoeffer to be arrested. Rather, Bonhoeffer accepted that life is a journey filled with many dangers, choices, and snares, but not more than we can handle each day.

The last two words in his affirmation are the key: "this day." The problem with many of us is that we often try to live in more than one day at once. We increase the burdens by borrowing others from the past and the future. We borrow regrets from the past and borrow anxiety from the future and then wonder why it seems more difficult than we can handle.

That is why the A.A. motto, "one day at a time," has come to mean so much to so many recovering alcoholics. They know that recovery is not something that can be done all at once, but rather one day, maybe even one hour at a time. And that is true for all of us. We cannot live all our days at once or shoulder all the burdens of those days at once, but rather only one day at a time. Remember, Jesus said, "Therefore, do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day."

In fact, sometimes the day's own troubles seem more than sufficient for the day. Sometimes it is not a matter of borrowing sorrow and anxiety from the past or the future, but a matter of having all of life come crashing down on us all at once today. Sometimes it seems too much to bear. And when life seems unbearable, words are not enough.

If words were enough, Jesus would not have had to be crucified. He could simply have told us how to overcome life's burdens. The fact is, we were never promised a life without difficulties. Rather, we are invited to participate in the life of Jesus, which was ultimately triumphant, but not before tremendous burdens of suffering and even death were encountered along the way. What this tells us is that when we suffer, God suffers with us. That's something to remember and never forget.

The ancient Apostle's Creed contains this statement about Jesus: "He was crucified, dead, and buried. He descended to hell." What does it mean, "he descended into hell"? One day, someone said to me, "That was the most treasured part of the creed." When I asked why, she answered, "Because hell is where I spend much of my life." Hell, a sense of being forsaken, a place of despair, a time when the day's own troubles are more than sufficient for the day. Jesus is there with us. Remember that.

Every parent knows what it is like to be awakened in the middle of the night by the cries of a child who has had a bad dream or who is scared for some other reason. Sometimes the fears are easily dealt with by our words of assurance that everything is going to be all right. But at other times, words are not enough, and the child says, "Stay with me." And we are able to respond easily, "Yes, I will stay with you." And then the child is comforted.

So remember, as you enter this new year, not only does God not add any burdens to your life, but God is always with you and is there to help carry you and whatever burdens you might have. That's what the 23rd Psalm and so many other passages in the Bible promise: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me." Amen.