

**"A Time to Remember"**  
**Philippians 1:1-11**

**November 5, 2000**  
**Dr. J. Howard Olds**

A fanatic fan at a superbowl game spotted an empty seat in the stadium. Too curious to let it pass, he asked a woman nearby if she knew anything about it. "That was my husband's seat," explained the woman, "but he died." "I'm very sorry," said the fan, "but I'm surprised there wasn't another relative or friend who would jump at the chance for a reserved seat." "Beats me," commented the lady, "but they all insisted on going to his funeral this afternoon."

Because faith is more important than fun, we gather this Sunday in church to remember the saints. It is a day of communion and thanksgiving. The gift of memory is one of God's finest gifts to us and I want us to use it as a tool of worship in our time together this morning to remember.

**To remember is to look back.** While in prison, Paul wrote a thank you note to the Philippian church that says, "I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers, I pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now." To remember is to lift a grateful heart in thanksgiving to God.

Some years ago, over in the mountains of east Tennessee, so the story goes; some government engineers flooded the valley as a part of an electrical power program. Houses had to be moved. Things were going quite well except for an old mountaineer and his family had lived in this particular cabin for years and years and generations and generations so they weren't sure how to get him to move until one engineer came up with a brilliant plan. They built the mountaineer a beautiful new stone house, with all the modern conveniences and when they got it ready, they went down and got the old mountaineer to come up to see it. "This house is yours," explained the officials. "All you need is just to move." The

mountaineer thought for a moment and then spitting some tobacco juice on the ground said, "I don't reckon I'll move." "Why?" asked the engineer. "Well, first of all, it ain't none of your business but since you asked me I'll just tell ya the way it is. My granddaddy started a fire in the hearth of our old cabin and he kept it burning all of his life. When granddaddy got too old to tend to it, he turned to my daddy and told him to keep the fire burning. My daddy's tended to that fire all of his days and when he got too old to take care of it; he turned to me and told me to never let it go out. So you see, I gotta keep the fire burning." The engineer came up with another brilliant idea. "What if we went down to your old cabin and took the coals of that fire and moved it up to your new fireplace?" The old mountaineer thought a moment and says, "Well, I reckon that'd be ok but when you go down to get it, don't you dare let the fire go out, I gotta keep it burning all the time."

We dare not forge into the future without the flame of the past burning in our very midst. I have loved hearing the stories of the saints who've served this congregation. It's part of my education plan of learning to be a part of you in the days that are to come. The famous ones like Sarah Cannon and the unknown ones who kept the lights on and fires burning and the doors open through the years and years that have come and gone.

At Sunday school time today, I taught the R. I. Moore class and I said to the leaders of that class, "I'd come down and teach it if you'd tell me who R. I. Moore was." Many of you know that story but he was the man who gave the land on which we worship today. He was a bachelor who had no family except that he had the whole family of Brentwood United Methodist Church at his disposal. A man who was so forward thinking that in his later years he would lead a procession in his wheel chair from the old church on Church St. down here to this place so that we could move into the future. We are deeply indebted to people like that -- the countless hundreds and thousands of people who have gone before us and have paved the way so we could be at a place like this today and worship. To remember is to look back. Don't get so busy going forward that you don't have time to stop and look back.

**To remember is to look inward.** Listen to verse seven from our scripture reading today. "It's right for me to feel this way about you, since I have you in my heart. I long for all of you with the affection of Jesus Christ." Isn't that a tender statement? Indeed it is. Blessed be the ties that bind us one to another.

We come today in the sure and certain reality that grief is real and when we asunder part, it gives us inward pain. There are no good-byes without grief and our small partings in this world tend to prepare us for the big parting that all of us will experience in days to come. Life is a lesson in surrender. Indeed it is.

James Moore in his book, *You Can Get Bitter or You Can Get Better*, says, "I was down in Louisiana Tech's football game one day and while thumbing through the program was amused at how professional all the printing had become at ballgames. Suddenly, right smack dab in the middle of this college football program, I found an article entitled, "Death and How To Deal With it." At first, I thought, why here? Then it came to me, why not here for there's no place that we go but that we deal with the sorrows of our lives." Grief is a part of all of our days and my prayer for you today who come here with a sadness of heart on a day of remembrance, is that you would find the grace of God sufficient for your needs.

We cannot run from our sorrows, neither can we bury them in business but we can bring our burdens to the Lord and leave them here even as we gather at this place today.

William Barclay, in his spiritual autobiography, said, "When my 21 year old daughter and her fiancée were both drowned in a tragic yachting accident just a few weeks before their marriage, my wife and I wondered if we could ever go on. We had all the questions. God didn't stop the accident at sea but He did still the storm in our own hearts, so much so that somehow we came through this terrible time on our own two feet." When the loving comfort of the Holy Spirit comes to you where you are today in remembering, remember to look back and give thanks. To remember is to look inward and be healed by God's grace.

◆ **To remember is to look upward and remember who we are.**

Verse 9 says, "And this is my prayer that your love may abound yet more and more in the knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern God's best until the day of Christ."

Is it my imagination or is it that Halloween gets bigger every year? This big, national kind of holiday that we call Halloween. This parade of witches, goblins, ghosts and devils has been historically an attempt to ward off death in our lives and to recognize that it is ever present and even in our sophisticated 21<sup>st</sup> century, we still parade it out every October 31<sup>st</sup>. But you see, historically, we took the fear out of *All Hallows Eve* and broke it with a celebration of *All Saints Day*. I wonder if our children get the connection? The ghosts and the goblins of Halloween have to turn into the faith and hope in celebration that is ours on *All Saints Day*. That's the connection. For death does not plunge Christians into separation and darkness. It ushers believers into the greater communion of the saints. We may die at the hands of the devil but we rise in the arms of Jesus and that's what the saints have done in the past.

On April 9, 1945, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was leading worship in defiance of Hitler and was arrested by Nazi soldiers right at the benediction. As he's taken out to his certain death, he turns and says to those who have worshipped with him, "This is the end, but for me it is the beginning of life." That's the victory of the saints.

Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna, in the middle of the second century, tied to a stake to be burned because he would not curse Christ and bow down to Caesar, would say, "For 86 years I've served Christ and He's never failed me yet. Dare I blaspheme my King on this day? I'm a Christian, there is no doubt about it."

Susannah Wesley, on the day of her own death, said, "As soon as I am released, sing a psalm and give praise to God." Her son Charles gathered his friends around him at the day of his death said, "Best of all, God is with us." You see, to remember is not just to look back and it's not just to look inward. To remember on the day of the *Communion of the Saints* is to look upward.

To proclaim our hope and the resurrection of the dead, let us live so that when our summons comes to join that innumerable caravan of the saints of light, we go not as devilish ghosts of the night but rise to meet our Savior face to face who has freed us forever by His amazing grace.

Let us gather for the communion of the saints. As the cloud of witnesses grows, let us throw off everything that would defeat us and let us persevere that we too may win the race until at last we meet the Master face to face. Oh yes, today -- remember. We believe in the resurrection of the dead and the communion of the saints.

Thanks be to God. Amen.