

A Responsibility To Remember

This is Memorial Day Weekend, a time officially set aside by our government to honor those who made the ultimate sacrifice for America and the cause of democracy and freedom. Over time it has become an occasion to honor not only those who served in the armed forces, but simply to remember all who have died. We have a responsibility to remember, to honor the memory of loved ones, mentors, people that shaped, molded and blessed our lives.

As we stated earlier, this Memorial Day holds a special significance in Tulsa because it marks the 100th anniversary of the Tulsa Race Massacre that occurred May 31-June 1 of 1921. We have a responsibility to remember the tragic events that happened in our city. You know the details, an untold number of deaths, the official, initial count was 25 black people killed and 12 white people killed. A state commission investigating the massacre in 2001 estimated anywhere from 75 to 300 killed. The area known as Black Wall Street was destroyed. A library, multiple grocery stores, drug stores, a theater, a dozen churches, over 30 restaurants, eight doctor's offices, and 1250 residences burned and demolished. Think about it, this all resulted from a mistake, a false accusation born out of prejudice and judgment. White citizens of Tulsa, acting out of fear and suspicion steeped in bigotry, feeding off of rumor and conspiracy theories, destroyed 35 square blocks. A dozen churches destroyed and no doubt some of the white folks who set fire to the churches were church goers themselves. We have a responsibility to remember so that when injustice, racism, prejudice, bigotry and blind hatred raises its head or its hand again, we will have the wisdom and courage to recognize it and strike it down, refusing to tolerate it, let alone embrace it. We have a responsibility to remember, to learn and speak the truth; we cannot remain silent in the face of bigotry and evil. We have a responsibility to build relationships across racial lines so that together we can say, "never again."

I was part of a group of pastors that met on the 77th anniversary of the race massacre in front of the Vernon AME church to pray and repent. I prayed the first prayer that evening, acknowledging sins of the past and the silence of churches when voices should have been raised in protest against the violence. I remember Dr. McCutcheon of Mount Zion Baptist Church and truly an elder statesman among the black community said something to the effect, "I've heard words I've never heard before, words I never thought I would hear in my lifetime" referring to the words of repentance and sorrow from white pastors and churches.

We have a responsibility to remember. “But that was all in the past. 100 years ago.” Yes, it was. A little personal perspective on the past. I was born May 1, 1955. In my lifetime I remember segregated bathrooms and drinking fountains. I remember segregated schools and neighborhoods. I remember the little Tastee Freeze down the street from my house in Muskogee refusing to serve a black man inside the restaurant. It may have been a long time ago, but it was in my lifetime that Rosa Parks refused to give her seat to a white man on a bus in Montgomery. In my lifetime Freedom Riders rode on buses through the South to protest segregation and test the enforcement of the Supreme Court’s decision that prohibited discrimination in interstate passenger travel. They were beaten and brutalized in the process, one of the buses burned in Anniston, Alabama. In my lifetime civil rights workers Andrew Goodman, James Chaney and Mickey Schwerner were murdered, their bodies buried in an earthen dam in Mississippi by klansmen with the help of a corrupt sheriff and deputy. Four young girls died in the bomb blast at 16th Street Baptist church in Birmingham. Herbert Lee was murdered in Mississippi because he dared to want his black neighbors to have the right to vote. Fannie Lou Hamer was thrown off of her land, arrested and beaten in jail for trying to register to vote, in my lifetime. Medger Evers was assassinated in his front yard for advancing the cause of civil rights. Police dogs and fire hoses were turned on children and teenagers marching to end segregation in Birmingham, Alabama, in my lifetime. John Lewis and scores of others peacefully marching to Selma were beaten on Bloody Sunday on the Edmund Pettus bridge. In my lifetime Martin Luther King told us about the dream and spoke of the promised land but never got there with us; in my lifetime people of color struggled for basic human rights, the right to vote, to live where they chose, to eat in a restaurant, to go to the school of their choice. We have a responsibility to remember the courage, the struggle, the sacrifice of so many brave, unnamed people. Don’t forget. We also have a responsibility to remember that in my lifetime civil rights legislation has been passed, change has come, Mississippi now has the most black elected officials of any state, in my lifetime a black president was elected and a black vice president now serves our country. We have a responsibility to remember the gains that have been made, but also to remember there is much that remains to be done. Remember with hope the words of Dr. King, that “the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.” We have a responsibility to remember so we will seek justice and we won’t let that kind of prejudice or racism or bigotry poison us again.

To the young black men and women of Carbondale, let me say, if anyone tries to convince you that you can't do something or be something because of the color of your skin, or if they try to tell you that you are a victim and saddle you with a victim mentality, tell them you're more than that. You're more than a victim, more than a survivor, you are an overcomer. As a people you've overcome slavery, Jim Crow, racism, prejudice of all kinds and you are still here, overcoming! It's more than Greenwood rising, you are rising as individuals, and you've got Jesus living in your heart, you've got a church behind you, you've got what it takes. Don't let anyone limit you or stop you. You can do all things through Christ. You are overcomers! You've got a responsibility to remember, people sacrificed to get you here so climb higher, fulfill your calling, reach your potential and beyond! Succeed. You can do it. What else?

On this Memorial Day weekend we have a responsibility to remember those who sacrificed on behalf of this nation, who, in the words of Abraham Lincoln at Gettysburg, "gave the last full measure of devotion." The freedoms we enjoy as Americans do not come without a price, without sacrifice. Our freedom to assemble this morning and worship God freely, as we choose, our freedom to protest, to rant and rave against the government and elected officials without fear of arrest, our freedom of speech, press, religion, the right to due process, the freedoms we enjoy as Americans have been won, protected, preserved by men and women who were willing to serve, fight and die for us. If you've forgotten the price of freedom, **I suggest you take a little drive to the National Cemetery at Ft. Gibson sometime.** You can get there in less than an hour. Stand and look at the rows and rows of white markers and you'll understand your responsibility to remember. Someone paid a price. Someone sacrificed for our freedom.

In addition to the members of our armed forces, we have a responsibility to remember the law enforcement officers who served our city and our state as well. They put their lives on the line to protect, defend and serve our community and its' citizens. All of its' citizens. It's a difficult and dangerous job. It was almost one year ago, June 30, 2020 that Officer Craig Johnson was shot and killed in the line of duty. Sargent Johnson wasn't able to go home to his family that day because he gave his life protecting your family and mine. We have a responsibility to remember the sacrifice made.

We have a responsibility to remember those who came before us, those upon whose shoulders we stand as part of the church of Jesus Christ. Saints of God literally laid down their

lives so we could know the truth of the gospel. Consider the bible I hold in my hands, the bible in my own language that I can read. In 1536 William Tyndale was put to death for translating the bible into English. He believed every British citizen should be able to read the bible in their own language, to be able to read it for themselves and for that, he was put to death. We have a responsibility to remember a price was paid to advance the cause of Christ, to maintain the orthodox teaching of the church and to build the kingdom of God.

I mentioned the names of several Civil Rights workers and leaders that should be remembered. I can mention the names of school teachers, Sunday School teachers in Muskogee, church leaders, pastors and youth pastors, men and women who have influenced my life, mentored me, blessed me, affirmed me, encouraged me, corrected me, given me opportunity to serve, to learn, to grow, to thrive. Spiritual fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, friends and colleagues, so many of them already in heaven, but their legacy and influence lives on and we have a responsibility to remember, to honor them. Someone taught you how to pray, how to serve Jesus, how to worship, how to live. Someone taught you the word of God. We honored one of those teachers a couple of Sundays ago but I could start naming names of people over the past 85 years that taught the word of God to the members of Carbondale who have gone on before us. What a legacy. Children's workers like Cecil Lawson, Emma Thompson and Cora Bickle, teachers like Dorothy Parmley, Juanita Emery, my Sunday School teachers Katherine Sparkman and Houston Wilkerson, teachers like Dr. Ray Brock, all of the pastors like Bro. Cornell, Bro. Pieratt, J.L. McQueen. They are all gone now and we honor them in part by our choices, by our determination to serve God and serve others, just as they taught us. Think of the people in your life that made the difference for you. Thank God for them!

People sacrificed to bring us here as a church. Faithful people who wouldn't quit. Faithful pioneers in Pentecost that were forced out of mainline churches because of their belief in the baptism in the Holy Spirit. That included founding members of our church who embraced a doctrine of spiritual empowerment, believing the Holy Spirit is still speaking and working miracles in the lives of people today. Choices were made and a price was paid as people stood for and embraced biblical truth. We have a responsibility to remember and hopefully, prayerfully, as we remember, we will find similar courage to stand for the unchanging and uncompromising word of God. Remember so we won't back down in the face of cultural or political pressure to conform. "This is what God's word says and it is upon God's word we take

our stand.” Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation said, “Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason...my conscience is captive to the word of God.” We have a responsibility to remember and then to stand like so many others in the past upon the integrity and truth of the word of God, our conscience captive to the word of God! What else?

Above all we have a responsibility to remember the sacrifice of Jesus, that it was for us that he gave his life. **“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” John 3:16** He died for you. He took your place on the cross, bore your sin and the judgment against your sin, the punishment for your sin, he bore that in his own flesh. He died for you, for me, in our place! We have a responsibility to remember and to be transformed and forever changed by it.

The Apostle Paul told Timothy, **“Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David.” 2 Timothy 2:8.** Paul never forgot. He had persecuted the church, convinced that Jesus was a fraud, a blasphemer until on the road to Damascus he had an encounter with the risen Lord. “Who are you Lord?” Imagine his surprise when he heard him say, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.” Everything changed in that moment for Paul. Everything he was convinced he knew and believed shifted. Jesus is alive, risen, Messiah, Son of God, Savior, the Way the Truth and the Life. From that moment on, the responsibility to not only remember but to live in light of that truth, that revelation, was always before him. He lost everything and counted it as rubbish in comparison to knowing Jesus. Paul lived with this as his motto: To live is Christ and to die is gain! It was all about Jesus and living for him!

I watched a Netflix series called Sherlock sometime back. After someone died saving his life Sherlock stated, “In saving my life she conferred a value upon it. It is a currency I do not know how to spend.” In dying for you to save you, Jesus conferred value upon you and upon your life. His death declares you have value. How do you spend that currency? I’ll tell you: You surrender your life to him. Like Paul, to live is Christ. We have a responsibility to not only remember but to live in light of his sacrifice, in light of his mercy, his forgiveness, his grace. You have been saved by God’s grace. You were died for. Live in the light of his love, his sacrifice and his grace! You have a responsibility to remember.