

Rooted and Built Up

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church
a new church for a new day, in Fremont, California,
on Sunday, July 28, 2013, by the Rev. Brenda Loreman.

Scripture: Psalm 85 and Colossians 2:6-19

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Do you remember? Where were you when...? If you fill in the blank, you are likely recalling a powerful collective memory.

“Where were you when you heard that President Kennedy had been shot?”

“Do you remember what you were doing when you found out the space shuttle Challenger exploded?”

Where were you when you found out about the twin towers on 9/11?”

Collective memory refers to the pool of information that is held in memory by the members of a group. That group can be large, like an entire nation, or it can be small, like a family group or church community. These shared memories—and the experiences that created them—are one way that the community shapes its shared identity.

Collective memories do not have to be tragic or traumatic to have a profound effect on a community. This month marks the anniversary of a seminal collective memory for our nation—indeed, the entire world: the first steps of a man on the moon, July 21, 1969. It was broadcast world-wide, and was a crowning achievement for American science and invention. It effectively ended the US-Soviet space race, and ushered in the era of ever-widening space exploration. It helped shape our national identity as a nation of scientific ingenuity, and a people of vision and exploration. Of course, it also popularized Tang, which was maybe not such a good thing.

I'm guessing that, even if you were not alive in 1969, or old enough to remember watching that first moon landing, you've seen the fuzzy black and white film of Neil Armstrong descending the ladder of the Eagle landing module, stepping off onto the moon's surface, and uttering those famous words: “That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind.” It's a collective memory rooted in the individual memories of the millions alive who watched in 1969, and all those born since who've learned about it in school.

This week, I learned something remarkable about that first lunar landing that I had never heard before. After the landing module had come to a safe landing, and before Neil Armstrong made his famous step for mankind, Buzz Aldrin celebrated communion. The first food and drink consumed on the surface of the moon was the Lord's Supper. Aldrin knew that he was doing something unprecedented in human history, and he felt he should mark the occasion somehow. Since he was an elder at his Presbyterian church in Houston, he could think of no better ritual than that of communion. So his church provided him with a miniature communion set with bread and wine.

Aldrin described pouring the wine into the chalice: “I poured the wine into the chalice our church had given me [...]. In the one-sixth gravity of the moon the wine curled slowly and gracefully up

the side of the cup. It was interesting to think that the very first liquid ever poured on the moon, and the first food eaten there, were communion elements.”¹

Communion is a collective memory. It is the memory of every communion that Christians have celebrated throughout the centuries. It is the memory of the table fellowship of Jesus and his disciples, the way he shared meals with those on the margins. It is the memory of the night he celebrated his last meal with his friends. It is one of the ways we are rooted and built up in Christ.

Being rooted in Christ is just what the Apostle Paul is asking the church at Colossae to do. This was a community made up of people who came from varied traditions, with a history of many other collective memories, all coming together to try to live in a new way. This church was like all the other churches Paul and his disciples started across Asia Minor, or what we would call modern-day Turkey. Some of them were Jewish and lived by the law of Torah, with its dietary and purity codes. Some of them were Roman and believed in the pantheon of Roman gods and goddesses. Many of them likely followed a version of their local pagan belief system, honoring local and ancestral deities.

This fledgling community of Christ-followers had to shape a new identity for itself and resist the outside influences of those practices they once followed. As with many of the conflicts that Paul addresses in his letters to the churches, we are not exactly sure what the problem was at Colossae. It seems to have something to do with the worship of spiritual beings or angels, and perhaps the practice of astrology and a belief in the stars controlling human destiny. Whatever it was, Paul invites the community of Colossae to “remember where they came from and to live faithfully out of that powerful sense of remembering. Remember, [he tells them], that you are rooted in Christ and [constructed, or] built up in him. Remember you are established in the faith. Remember what you were taught.”² Don’t worry about these old practices and rituals any more. Remember your baptism. He calls the community into a shared identity through the practice of active, collective remembering.

In some ways, the issues facing the church at Colossae are not so different from those facing this congregation. Now, to my knowledge, we’re not having a problem with the worship of angels or the practice of astrology (although, I don’t know—maybe there are things you’re not telling me), but the hard work of forming a community with a shared identity out of groups that have come together with different traditions and practices is the hard work that this church has had to do—and will continue to need to do.

Paul’s invitation to the Colossians is an invitation to us, as well. We, too, are asked to remember that we are rooted and built up in Christ, established in the faith. We are invited to always remember our baptism and the new life it offers us. We are called to be the body of Christ together. And we are invited to the practice of collective remembering.

One of the ways I think this collective remembering happens in faith communities is through the way that we remember and share the memories of the people who shaped our congregations through their powerful and profound acts of faith.

¹Elizabeth Dias, “The Secret Communion on the Moon: The 44-Year Anniversary” *Time*, July 20, 2013, accessed July 26, 2013.<http://swampland.time.com/2013/07/20/the-secret-communion-on-the-moon-the-44-year-anniversary/>.

²Rodger Y. Nishioka, *Feasting on the Word Year C, Volume 3*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 282.

I had not been here very long before I heard the name of Mary Hewitt. From the memories shared with me, I gather that, for the folks at Niles Congregational Church—indeed, for all of Fremont—Mary was a force of nature. I have heard stories of how she co-founded the Tri-Cities Homeless Coalition and served on the boards of many, many Tri-City charitable organizations. I have heard how she fed the homeless from the fruit she grew in her own backyard. People have shared with me that the homeless would knock on her door and say, “Mary, I’m hungry,” and she would offer them food from her garden. I have been told how she kept a cupboard here on this campus stocked with non-perishable food that she would distribute to the needy.

Mary was rooted and built up in Christ, established in the faith, and was a living exemplar of being the Body of Christ and building God’s Kin-dom here in this place. Her legacy continues to live on here at Niles Discovery Church, through the memories of those she touched and taught.

The other force of nature I’ve been hearing stories of lately is our brother Bruce Kieft. Having so recently celebrated his life this month, I’m sure the memories of how he shaped First Christian Church of Fremont are prominent in many hearts and minds this month. From what I gather, he was the kind of guy who, if something needed doing, he would see that it got done. I understand that he was a reluctant church-goer until Don Anderson paid a visit to the Kieft home and noticed that the Kiefts had a van. “We’ve got some folks from the Serra Center who need a ride to church on Sundays,” said Don, “and I see that you have a van.” So Bruce did what needed doing. He was also not above being silly in order to accomplish a goal. I have heard the story of how he dressed up in a Bunny suit and stood on Niles Boulevard, waving people into church on Easter Sunday morning. People have shared with me how he dressed up in a hula costume, complete with a Marge Simpson wig, as part of a safe Halloween program one year.

Bruce knew what it means to be rooted and built up in Christ. He knew what it means to be part of the Body of Christ, and used his gifts and talents in service to something greater than himself. And his legacy continues to live on here at Niles Discovery Church, through the memories of those whose lives he touched.

I am sorry that I never knew Mary, and that I could not get to know Bruce as well as I would have liked. But because they live on in the collective memories and shared identity of Niles Discovery Church, because they have become a part of the way you all live out your faith in this community, they have become a part of me and my faith life, too.

Likewise, I bring with me the stories of people you have never met, people whose examples of faith and embodied Christian life are etched deep into my soul—people who touched my life and taught me about what it means to be rooted and built up in Christ. I bring with me Joan Pettis, and Jack Reed, and Eleanor Sekerak, and Loris Coburn. You will never know them, but because they are a part of the way I live out my faith, they will be a part of you, too.

A short lifetime ago, the world had never seen our planetary home from space. Rockets loaded with cameras shot into the atmosphere had taken grainy, black-and-white photos of parts of the earth since the forties, but it wasn’t until the Apollo missions that we got to see the earth in full color, all blue and white and tan and green, floating in the black vastness of space. Those famous “Blue Marble” pictures are now a part of our collective memory, and they changed the way we saw the earth. They changed the shared identity of humanity; they shaped the way we understood ourselves as a world community.

As we continue to live into our shared identity as Niles Discovery Church, may we hear the Apostle's call to remember that we are established in the faith. May we continue to lift up the memories of those who shaped us through their powerful and profound acts of faith. And may we, too use our gifts and talents in the service of something greater than ourselves, always rooted and built up in Christ. Amen.