

“Looking and Remembering”

Deuteronomy 5:15; Hebrews 12:2
May 30, 2010

Rev. Richard L. Haney
Fairfield Presbyterian Church

Two months ago I had emergency surgery that removed a tumor from my spine. The unexpected March 29 surgery followed my planned gall bladder surgery that took place on March 22—seven days earlier. Now it is May 30—two months or 8 weeks later. Have you ever noticed how your *memory* of big events in your life changes; it changes as the time gap between the event and the moment of recall widens. And it changes with every telling and re-telling of your story.

Let me explain. I have told my surgery story more often than I care to remember. More often, I say, because all the story-telling inevitably focuses your attention on yourself and a healthy person more often gazes outward at others and thinks externally about a bigger world than oneself. Too much inwardness and too much self-focus shrinks your world. BTW, this is why, I think, mission-minded folk are among the world’s healthiest people—spiritually speaking.

So often people have responded to that part of my story about the spinal tumor being a benign tumor with words of congratulations. “*I know you are relieved..., pleased..., thankful...*” Yes, indeed, I am. Christian folk tell me I am *blessed* and others tell me I am *lucky*. And for most people that is the story and the conclusion. Who can blame them? We all are busy. We need stories to be summarized. We reach for the bottom line.

Okay. Here is the summary version. I had a nasty surprise with tingling & numbness in my legs and a sudden trip to the ER and a ten-day stay in the hospital. All the doctors were sure I had cancer that had spread to the spine. But it wasn’t cancer. It was a strange thing called a *hemangioma* (a blood tumor) and they got it out. What might have been a 15-hour surgical procedure only took 5 hours. Hurray. Count your blessings and move on.

Oh, but not so fast. There is one more thing. Really? Yes. I went to the hospital because I had this sudden onset of numbness and tingling in my

legs. My body's entire lower half felt asleep and sluggish and I had trouble walking and keeping my balance. And guess what? Eight weeks after surgery I still feel sluggish and tingly and imbalanced from the waist down. You see that wonderfully benign tumor was not entirely benign—not in its effects. It compressed my spinal cord and the spinal cord plays this vital role in telling your nerves what to do.

So let me take the brief summary but amend it slightly. The *good news* is that I'm recovering well from spine surgery and I do not have cancer. The *more difficult news* is that I have a spinal cord injury and I'm doing strenuous rehab to learn how to walk again with this loss of balance and reduced strength in my lower half.

Okay. But it's a matter of time right? You do the therapy, you get stronger, your sensation returns and you live happily ever after. Well, maybe. Kinda. My surgeon told me a month ago I would improve but that he doubted I'd get everything back. "*You will get better from where you are "now" (then I was walking a little with a walker) but you are unlikely to return to what you used to be and used to do.*"

So is the glass half full or half empty? It depends.

Now I'm not telling the story so you will embrace me with *sympathy* and *care* and uphold me in *prayer*—you already are doing so. And I'm really grateful. Telling my story does have a therapeutic angle and I do want to share the *whole* story with my church family. But my story is just an introduction to the message—a Memorial Day message about remembering.

Our **remembering** often highlights one dimension and pushes the other dimensions into the background. It is hard for us to keep everything in view and all details in bold relief. Like when you gaze at a picture or a painting some aspects grab your attention and some things remain in the background.

Tomorrow is **Memorial Day**—a national holiday. And what are we supposed to remember? What grabs your attention and what remains distant or blurred? Does Memorial Day mean that the neighborhood

pool now is open? Or that it is a good day for a back-yard barbeque? Does the three-day weekend represent the start of summer? It already is warm like summer. School will be out before you know it. But is that the meaning of Memorial Day? No, those are little details that ought to be in the *background*.

Memorial Day institutionalizes our nation's collective memory. We recall the sacrifices (often heroic) of America's soldiers who died on the battlefield or elsewhere doing their duty to protect the people--and to preserve our freedom. Memorial Day has quite a history. I should say histories—plural (e.g. Boalsburg, PA tradition).

Because the tradition(s) of people (mostly women) going to cemeteries to decorate the graves of fallen soldiers—this tradition apparently happened spontaneously in many locales. And Decoration Day, as it was first called, started after the War Between the States concluded. The terrible swift sword of the American Civil War claimed over 600,000 lives--so there were lots of graves to decorate.

It is good and noble and honorable that we remember our fallen comrades. It is important to know our nation's military history: Revolutionary War, War of 1812, the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, the Great War (WWI), WWII, the Korean War, Vietnam, the Gulf War, Iraq War II, Afghanistan, etc. Soldiers fell in all these wars.

Our nation is free because we remain dedicated to principles of freedom and the exercise of democracy and because men and women have guarded our borders and defended our freedom. And it is **for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us - that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they here gave the last full measure of devotion - that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation shall have a new birth of freedom; and that this government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.** Remember those words? Of course! Lincoln's unforgettable words at Gettysburg.

So we remember the **good** (their sacrifice and *honor* and duty) and the **more difficult** (sacrifice, loss and *death*). We remember them together.

Now let me suggest one more arena where we remember “the good” and “the more difficult” together.

Remember that we see some things in bold relief and in the foreground and other things we register as more distant and less distinct. Remember the pictures you saw on the screen?

You know that our faith as Christians focuses deliberately on the work of one Person, **Jesus Christ**, Son of God and Son of Man. We recently celebrated Resurrection Day—Easter Sunday. This year it arrived on April 4; I’ll never forget it because I was still in a hospital room. For the first time in at least 20 years I was not going to preach on Easter Sunday. So I awoke early and prayed for Dixie and all my preacher friends who on that special day were proclaiming from pulpits—“*He is Risen; He is risen indeed!*”

When we think of the work of Jesus Christ we think first of Easter. At least I do. Let’s focus on the good news, on the triumph! But of course Good Friday happened as well. There is no Easter Sunday without Good Friday or Maundy Thursday or Palm Sunday. There is no empty tomb without the Upper Room and Gethsamane and Golgotha. There is no sunshine without the shadows as well.

Story: regarding the Crucifix & Roman Catholics

All of our pictures have texture and a mix of colors. They have elements etched in bold and others that are in shadow and background. And we have this marvelous, God-given facility to change what is the object of our focus. We can narrow our gaze and put (in our mind’s eye) one thing in the background and another thing in focus. Try it and see.

I live because He lives. Because He lives I can face tomorrow. Because He rose I expect to be raised as well. But the Resurrection does not eliminate suffering and sacrifice and sadness for us. Now I usually like to keep those harder things as distant as possible. I do not want to think too hard or too often about Christ’s agony on the cross. Or how my sin caused his sacrifice to be necessary. Or about “taking up my cross and following Jesus.”

I do not really want to have an injury or experience pain. And I'd rather not suffer loss. Not loss of sensation nor loss of leg strength nor loss of my ability to run or walk smoothly.

Neither do I desire other kinds of loss--loss of friendship nor loss of loved ones. But such "more difficult" things are part of our human story. They belong to each of our journeys. We have this treasure in earthen vessels and the vessels crack and leak.

And I do realize, in my clearer moments, that *my* losses and *my* suffering, are quite a bit smaller and lesser than so many around me. Three days a week I walk into Sheltering Arms for rehab, for physical therapy. I walk in—with a cane to be sure, but on my own two feet. Many people, however, are brought in via wheelchair. Others hobble in with walkers or have leg problems plus head injuries. Yes, I'm lucky—so to speak. Yes, I'm blessed. Yes, I'm fortunate.

In one of his letters the apostle Paul calls our troubles "*this light momentary affliction.*" Right. That's what I've been calling my troubles—*light* and *momentary*! But of course Paul is correct. He told the Corinthians (and I believe him) that such affliction is preparing us for an *eternal weight of glory*. The sunshine does outshine the shadows. Light is greater than darkness. The Story (God's kingdom) does have a happy ending.

Often we do remember the good and the pleasant and the pain and suffering recedes into the background. Otherwise, how would a woman consider childbirth again? How would we drive again after a serious car accident? Of course we must be careful about *buried* memories and wounds we have *hidden* deep down in our psyches—but that's a theme for another day and another message.

So how do you gaze at a painting? How do you look at your own life, your own life's journey? Do you see the good and the more difficult? Have you figured out how to see one in light of the other?

And how do you celebrate Memorial Day? What ought we be remembering this weekend? How do you regard Jesus Christ? Do you look to Him as the author and finisher of your faith?

Story: Cullen's verse of Scripture (looking unto Jesus...)