

## 19<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (L26B) – September 30, 2018

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29, Mark 9:38-50

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I'm going to apologize up front this to the youngsters in our midst for this sermon. Last week I heard from one mother that my sermon about superheroes and hobbits really connected with her children. I think there's less chance of that happening this week, because I need to talk about nostalgia this morning. And for nostalgia, you need at least a little bit of age under your belt. I'm going to ask us to think back to the good old days of our childhood and youth. And for you youngsters that won't work, because – believe it or not – you are living in the good old days! These are the days you will be looking back at when you are older, maybe wishing that you could go back to them.

But for the rest of us, it's probably not very hard to be nostalgic. What is it you think about? What are your fond memories of the past? I think for me, some of my fondest memories have to do with family gatherings, and vacations, which for us were almost always trips to visit family and family friends. We would spend a week every summer in Mishawaka, Indiana with good friends of my parents, who had kids our age. That week almost always included a trip to Warren Dunes State Park on the shore of Lake Michigan, and day-long badminton tournaments in the backyard. Another week was spent an hour and a half further north in Kalamazoo, Michigan where my dad's sister and her family lived. I could go on and on, but really my point is for you to do your own reminiscing. What do you think of? What do you wish could be the way it used to be? Think back. Doesn't it seem like life was simpler then? And just better?

I spent a good part of this past Friday at the Illinois Conference of Churches annual assembly, which was held just down the road here in Champaign at St. Peter's UCC. The topic for the assembly was "Christian healing in a fractured world: an ecumenical perspective on polarization in the US in 2018." Clearly, the topic was chosen out of the conviction that we are more polarized now than we used to be, and the presenters backed that up, while cautioning that our perception tends to exaggerate things to some extent. So there was some implicit nostalgia going on there. Things used to be better. How do we get back to the good old days?

Then over lunch I spoke to a pastor from the Presbyterian church who had done some work with the national faith and order commission of the World Council of Churches, which I know something about. A lot has been accomplished. Probably the most important achievement was the document on Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry from 1982, that set forth common understandings among the various church bodies in these three areas. Then of course there was the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification signed by the Lutherans and Roman Catholics in 1999, and other churches since then. But as we discussed this it was clear that both of us had the impression there is not a lot of enthusiasm these days for continuing that kind of work. Our churches are happy to work together on all sorts of practical things, and even in many instances to share altar and pulpit fellowship - meaning we can call each others' pastors. But we don't seem to want to keep moving forward to the goal of visible unity, which is the stated goal of the ecumenical movement. Now this is a bigger topic than I have time for here, but my main point in bringing it up is that we were being nostalgic for the good old days of the ecumenical movement. Wasn't it great when we were seriously engaging each others' traditions, when we were forging those landmark ecumenical agreements?

Being nostalgic is also how we can look at the church more narrowly, whether our denomination or our local congregation. It's not hard for me to be nostalgic about the good old days

of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. I was there when it was founded at its constituting convention in Columbus, Ohio in the spring of 1987. I was finishing my second year of seminary. Our worship professor was in charge of the worship at the convention, and he recruited a bunch of us seminarians to be worship leaders. I went online to the ELCA archive and pulled up some of the old pictures from that event. And there we are in a number of the photos. The ELCA was 5.2 million members strong at its birth 31 years ago. Now we number about 3.5 million. It's hard not to be wistful about the good old days of the ELCA.

And lest you think we invented nostalgia in our time, our first reading this morning from Deuteronomy will quickly clear that up. The setting is the wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula. The Israelites have escaped from slavery in Egypt and are living a temporary existence on their way the Promised Land. God has provided them with manna to keep them alive, but they're getting sick of it. So what do they do? They think back to the good old days in Egypt when they had fish and cucumbers, and melons, leeks, onions, and garlic. It can make you hungry just listening to the list of ingredients! Remember how good it was?

Of course the supreme irony of their nostalgia was that they had already, in a relatively short time, conveniently forgotten that they had been slaves in Egypt. They had forgotten that they had been forced to work in oppressive conditions without the proper supplies. They had forgotten that their newborn sons had been slaughtered by the Egyptians at birth. But oh, that fish! That garlic!

And as I've said a few times over the past couple of weeks, the disciples had their own kind of nostalgia for the good old days too. They expected Jesus to be the kind of Messiah who would bring back the glory days of the united kingdom of Israel. But that was not to be. That's not what Jesus had come for. It is not what God was up to. In Jesus Christ, God was leading the disciples into a new and better future that was to be altogether different from the good old days. And of course that's what Moses was doing too with the children of Israel – leading them from slavery into freedom, from a foreign land back to their home.

I want to suggest that that is what God is doing with us as well – in the ecumenical movement, in the ELCA, in this congregation, and maybe even in our country. We're not going back to the good old days. It's not ever going to be like it was before. But it's also true that the good old days were never really as good as we imagine that they were. The ecumenical movement did good work, but goal of visible unity of the church is not a goal in and of itself. The purpose of church unity is to present a unified witness to the world for the sake of drawing people to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The peak of church attendance in the United States was the late 1950s. But full and growing churches did not necessarily fulfill the goal of making disciples, and the church of that time was not always successful in passing on the faith to its children. And there were no women pastors in the good old days, and the explosion of Christianity in the Southern Hemisphere had not yet happened.

So here's how I see it. We can resort to nostalgia and bemoan how much worse things are now than they used to be. Or we can open our eyes and our hearts to the new things God is doing in the world today, and the new opportunities that God is calling us to, opportunities that would never have been there if the church had never faced change. In reality we will probably do some wavering back and forth between the two extremes, but my hope and prayer is that God will send on us a share of the Holy Spirit to draw us into the future with hope and confidence that God's work in the world is ongoing, and our partnership in that work is crucial. May it be so, and may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.