

# The Royal Poinciana Chapel

Sermon By

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**"DON'T FORGET TO REMEMBER..."**

July 7, 2002

TEXT: "Therefore we must pay closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it."

Hebrews 2:1

Frederick Buechner, one of the finest writers and novelists of our time, is an ordained Presbyterian Pastor, with connections to Palm Beach through friends. He has written a couple of dozen significant books, fiction and nonfiction, which you would enjoy if you do not know him. The Sacred Journey, The Magnificent Defeat, The Return of Ansel Gibbs, Open Heart, and The Book of Bebb are but a few of my favorites.

Another is a delightful book, written almost twenty years ago, titled A Room Called Remember. It is relevant to the introduction of our sermon today. The book begins with an explanation of a dream Dr. Buechner had some time ago.

As I grow older, I am becoming more interested and more puzzled by dreams. I think I went for years without dreaming, maybe decades, or at least I was not disturbed by the dreams and did not remember any I might have had (I know experts tell us we are always dreaming, whether we know it, or remember them, or not.) Anyway, I did not recall many dreams for a long long time, almost from childhood.

But in these more recent years I find a change taking place. I almost always dream when I go to sleep and I remember each of them every night, for a while anyway. They often bring me to a startling abrupt awakening; sometimes out of the fearful circumstances of the dream, sometimes out of the pleasant association involved in the dream. Like the other night, I dreamed that my father, who died almost twenty years ago, and I were together in a happy

venture. We were shopping. That was unusual for my father abhorred shopping, he did not like spending money. I love to shop and, as he used to say, my pockets all have holes in them. I like to spend money. That's what it is for - right? But there we were enjoying each other laughing together, as we seldom took time to do when he was alive. I woke up happy, but weeping and feeling a little sad.

At other times my dreams are awful. One night, for example, I was startled awake by a dream in which a band of foreign legionaries were chasing me. They caught me and tied me up. With no apparent chance of escape, I fooled them by waking up. And, while my poor old heart was beating almost out of my chest, I was relieved to find myself in the safety of our charming little house on Jamaica Lane, oh dear.

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Buechner's charter dream in his book was a pleasant one. He dreamt that he was a guest at a Hotel somewhere unknown and unnamed. He had been given a room which seemed familiar and which made him happy. He felt at peace. Everything was just the way it should have been (not often true in real life). He wandered about and always came back to the same room. Then one time, on a future visit, he was assigned a different room, which seemed dark and small and cramped. He went down to the front desk to complain. The clerk was friendly. He told him he could have his favorite room anytime if he only asked for it by name. "By name. What name?" "Dr., the room you like is called 'Remember.'"

**“Why was it called ‘Remember’, I asked himself.... In one sense the past is dead and gone, over and done with, but in another sense... every person we have ever known, everything that ever happened to us, a scrap of some song, a book we read as a child, an old photograph....” Old failures, old hurts... they all are there, on the surface of our memories.**

**The room called "Remember" is far more than a helter skelter collection of memories. To enter this room is “to remember on purpose”, on cue from deep inside. It invites you to get beneath the surface, to call up the memories which tell of the goodness and greatness of the Lord, to be inspired by the gratitude we feel.**

**In I Chronicles 16, King David, when the Ark was carried into the tent, appointed Thanksgiving to be sung to the Lord: “O Give Thanks, Call Upon His Name, Make Known His Deeds...” Finally he concludes 11 verses later, “Remember the wonderful works that he has done, the wonders he has wrought.”**

**Remember what God has done in our lives, in your life, and in the life of our community. Remember all that he has done in Christ Jesus. Remember those moments in our lives when Christ came to us in countless disguises, through people who one way or another strengthened us, comforted us, healed us, judged us. ...because we remember, we have this high and holy hope.**

**Remember him who himself remembered the thief who died beside him on the cross. To have faith is to remember and wait. “To wait in hope is to have what we hope for already begin to come true in us, through our hoping.” Remember. Don’t forget to remember!**

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**At least once a month, no matter how busy or preoccupied I am, I take a little time to pull back from the pile of papers and telephone calls I am to return and I think of how good God has been to me. I call it “A Time to Remember.”**

**First, I think about how good life has been to me and mine. I recall the people who through the years have taken excellent care of me, without whose help I could never have found my way to this life as a Christian pastor in Palm Beach which I so much enjoy. I remember especially my parents who gave everything for their children, and their grandchildren. When I remember them, I want to be a better parent and grandparent. I remember my wife and all she has done for me, and our children and grandchildren.**

**I think of teachers at schools and Universities who carved away some of the debris so I could get a closer look at where I wanted to go. I remember them with gratitude. I remember the individuals, who knows why they chose to help me, but they did. One man decided I should have a college education. No one in my family ever had. He provided my original scholarship himself. Then for four more years he arranged for me to apply to the appropriate foundations, churches and organizations for help, which I received. When I remember him and others, I want to do more to help other young people receive a college education. Remembering, I could go on all day.**

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**On this day we have chosen to celebrate the 4<sup>th</sup> of July weekend in our worship, I want to apply our subject to our remembering what others have done for our nation, and to recall our debt to the Lord and to them. I could stop off and rest at a hundred different places. Surely it is worth remembering the military personnel who gave and give their time and life to keep us safe and free. I also think of the great men and women who have served our nation in political, educational, cultural and religious spaces.**

**On Independence Day, of course, we should not forget to remember the original leaders God chose to declare our independence as a nation. I was surprised in my research to read how young the signers of the Declaration were. I tend to think of them as white haired older men. Ben Franklin of course was 70. But John Hancock**

was 39, John Adams 40, Thomas Jefferson was 33 when he wrote the Declaration. Benjamin Rush was barely 30 when he signed it. Even the General and President to be, George Washington was just 44 years old in 1776.

I clipped a marvelous article by David McCullough, who wrote a recent biography of John Adams. It was in the *New York Times* last Thursday. He said: "The odds against them challenging the might of the British Empire were overwhelming. None had had any experience in revolution-making, or nation-making. And let us never forget they were setting out... to establish an entirely new nation. There was little at hand with which to fight a war – almost no gun powder, no navy and no money to speak of. There were few trained officers. Washington himself, for example, had never commanded an army in battle. (David McCullough 4th of July 2002, *New York Times*, editorial page)

"As daunting as almost anything was the lack of popular support. In late summer of 1775 Jefferson confided to a kinsman that he still hoped for reconciliation, expressing a widely held position in the colonies. By early 1776 about a third of our colonists were for independence, while another third remained adamantly opposed. The rest, in the old human way, were waiting to see who came out on top." (It is always that way. So few actually dive into the middle of the battle. They wait to see which side is likely to win.)

"We think we live in a dangerous, uncertain time, and we do. But theirs was worse, and they had no sure way of knowing how things would turn out any more than we do. In July of 1776, for example, the British landed 32,000 troops on Staten Island, more than the entire population of the city of Philadelphia, the largest city in America at the time...." John Adams predicted a long and costly struggle in the Revolutionary war. It actually lasted eight years. "I am well aware of the toil and blood and treasure it will cost us," he wrote. He also wrote to Abigail his wife, "Yet through the gloom I can see rays of

"ravishing light and glory." (Rays of ravishing light and glory...)

"For her part, at home in Massachusetts, rearing the children, running the family farm without John, on her own she had to cope with rampant inflation, shortages of all kinds and an epidemic of small pox. She wrote, "Posterity, who are to reap the blessings of this effort, will scarcely be able to conceive the hardships and suffering of their ancestors." Nor will they remember how much was given.

On the Golden Anniversary of the Declaration fifty years later, on July 4, 1826 John Adams and Thomas Jefferson both died, on the same day. McCullough concludes, "If ever there was a time to draw strength from their example and renew our commitment to their cause, it is now. Today's their day, their day of days. And, we might as well begin, as John Adams suggested, with expressions of gratitude to God almighty."

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Two years ago about now Congressman Tom Lewis sent me some information about those who signed the Declaration of Independence. I mentioned it briefly to you then. But I saved it. It began, "Have you ever wondered what happened to the 56 men who signed the Declaration of Independence? Five were tortured and killed as traitors. Twelve had their homes ransacked and burned. Two lost their sons serving in the Revolutionary Army; another had two sons captured. Nine of them fought and died from wounds or hardships of the Revolutionary War."

"They signed and they pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor. What kind of men were they? Twenty-four were lawyers and jurists. Eleven were merchants, nine were farmers and large plantation owners; men of means, well educated. But they signed the Declaration of Independence knowing full well that the penalty would be death if they were captured. Carter Braxton of Virginia, a wealthy planter and trader, saw his ships swept from the seas by the British Navy. He sold his home and

**“properties to pay his debts, and died in rags. Thomas McKeam was so hounded by the British that he was forced to move his family almost constantly. He served in the Congress without pay, and his family was kept in hiding. His possessions were taken from him, and poverty was his reward.”**

**“Such were the stories and sacrifices of the American Revolution. These were not wild eyed, rabble-rousing ruffians. They were soft-spoken men of means and education. They had security, but they valued liberty more. Standing tall, straight, and unwavering, they pledged: ‘For the support of this declaration, with firm reliance on the protection of the divine providence, we mutually pledge to each other, our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.’”**

**“They gave us a free and independent America. The history books never told you a lot of what happened in the Revolutionary War. We didn’t just fight the British. We were British subjects at that time and we fought our own government!”**

**Some of us take these liberties so much for granted. We shouldn’t. So, don’t forget to remember and silently thank these patriots. It’s not much to ask for the price they paid.**

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**Do you recall the story in the Gospels where ten lepers appealed to Jesus to heal them. Leprosy was a deadly scourge. “Jesus have mercy on us,” they cried out. Of course He had compassion on them and healed them. Then He told them to go and show themselves to a priest, the way to be certified, before a healed leper could return from his confinement back into society. They ran, literally ran, off to the priests, and the Bible says “While they were running they were healed.” On the way, the healing came. I like that, they became involved in the healing. They were so excited, they kept on running, it says.**

**All except one, a Samaritan. He alone turned around and went back to Jesus, threw himself at his feet and thanked him. Jesus was touched,**

**but he also noticed that the Samaritan was the only one who remembered to turn around and say thank you. The famous words which our Lord used in his question will linger with you forever. “Were not ten men healed? Where are the other nine?” Where are the other nine?**

**A bit harsh, maybe. Perhaps more than one in ten was really grateful for what God had done. Their excitement was so great, perhaps they forgot. Perhaps more than one in ten in our time does not forget to remember. Perhaps more than one in ten is inspired with each remembrance of the peace and beauty of us and freedom of our nation. But surely most are too busy running on to stop and turn around to thank Christ for all that he has done for us.**

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**Remember the one thief who was hanging on a cross next to our Lord? The other one chided Christ, taunting him. But this one said “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingly power.” And Jesus said to him, “I will, truly this day you will be with me in paradise. I will remember you.”**

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**I laughed and cried when I read about the Fourth of July celebration this year of our American Soldiers in Afghanistan. Military posters were tacked up everywhere. They read “Uncle Sam commands you to have fun!” Red, white, and blue American flags were flying from every standard and every jeep aerial. 7,000 Special Forces at Bagrum Air Base were on high security alert. But still they played soccer, and basketball. They jogged with their rifles on their shoulders. Each one received a charcoal grilled steak. 7,000 steaks were flown in from Nebraska. Add to that the hamburgers, hot dogs, corn, and baked beans. Then at the end of the day the most of them gathered to remind themselves why they were there, and to remember their people back home. God Bless America. Indeed!**

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**There has been quite a stir created by the recent court ruling that to have our pledge of allegiance include the words “Under God” is an offense to**

some people. As you know those two words were not in the original pledge of allegiance to the flag when it was written by Francis Bellamy for a young people's magazine in Boston in 1892. 12,000,000 American children first said it together on Columbus Day October 12, 1892.

The words "Under God" were added by an Act of Congress in 1954. President Eisenhower then explained. "We are offering the transcendence of religious faith in America's heritage and future. In this way we shall constantly strengthen those spiritual weapons which forever will be our country's most powerful resource in peace and in war."

Ike was right. In the Declaration of Independence, it says "All men are created equal, and are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights." Chief Justice Warren in 1983 said, "The use of prayer is embedded in the nation's history and tradition..." One current commentator, Bill O'Reilly recently wrote, "The critics are trying to impose a narrow set of secular standards on a nation that was founded on principles that are much greater." (Bill O'Reilly page 9, July 6, 2002, *Ft. Lauderdale Sun Sentinel*)

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Well, it is time to go. Let me close with a story told by Senator John McCain of Arizona. He wrote, "As you may know, I spent five and one half years as a prisoner of war during the Vietnam War. In 1971 the North Vietnamese Army moved prisoners into large rooms from solitary confinement, with as many as 30 to 40 men to a room. One of the men who moved into the room with me was a young man named Mike Christian. Mike came from a small town near Selma, Alabama. At 17, he enlisted in the US Navy. He later earned a commission by going to Officer Training School. Then he became a Naval Flight Officer.

"He was shot down and captured in 1967. Mike had a keen and deep appreciation of the opportunities this country and our military provide for the free people of the world. As part

of the change in treatment, the Vietnamese allowed some prisoners to receive packages from home. Mike received, with other things, a bamboo needle. Over a period of a couple of months he created an American flag and sewed it on the inside of his shirt. Every afternoon, before we had our usual bowl of soup, we would hang Mike's shirt on the wall of the cell and say the Pledge of Allegiance together. I know that the Pledge of Allegiance may not seem the most important part of your day, but I can assure you that in that stark cell it was indeed the most important and meaningful event we had.

"One day the Vietnamese searched our cell, and discovered Mike's shirt with the flag sewn inside. They took him outside, and beat him severely. Then, they opened the door of the cell and threw him back in. We cleaned him up as well as we could. It was not long after the excitement died down, I looked over in the corner of the room. There sitting beneath the dim light bulb with a piece of red cloth, and another shirt, and his bamboo needle, was Mike Christian. Sitting there with his eyes almost shut from the beating he had taken, he was making another American flag. He was making that new flag because he knew how important it was to us to be able to Pledge our allegiance to our flag and our country from our prison cell.

"The next time you say the Pledge of Allegiance, do not forget the sacrifice and courage that thousands of Americans have made to build our nation and to promote freedom around the world. You must remember our duty, our honor, and our country, when you say: 'I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.'" For now and forever more. Amen.

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