

The Royal Poinciana Chapel

Sermon By

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"THAT OLD GANG OF MINE . . ."

**Text: "For the righteous will never be moved;
they will be remembered forever." -- Psalm 112:6**

My mother was a good pianist, she played the organ at her church. As with many families in those days before television, we often sat or stood around the living room piano singing. Everybody had a favorite song. Mine was "Beautiful Dreamer." My brother's was "The Dark Town Strutters' Ball." My father's was "That Old Gang of Mine." Perhaps you know the song. The last stanza ends: "Those wedding bells are breaking up that old gang of mine." My dad used to smile when we came to that line, he who eventually was married 52-1/2 years, also liked to sing "I Wish I Was Single Again." . . . "Funny How Time Slips Away," and more than wedding bells break up that old gang of mine. I warn you . . . this is a sentimental sermon.

There are seven little steps to get to the heart of the message. The first six are scattered; they are looking for the seventh, which is the one which matters . . . let us begin:

(1) The first step has to do with memory itself. Memories can be nice or not, but have you ever focused on the part memory plays in keeping us alive? In the whole evolutionary process, memory preserved the species. It was placed by God within the brain for two reasons.

First, memory developed, or was given, so that the individual could recall danger. Elementary, but it ensured that we did not have to start out anew when faced with the same terrors every day. Survival was related to the ability to remember what or who

was dangerous. Some predators on the huge tundras were looking for you; to remember their sight or sound gave a head start.

To advance to the point. God gave the brain a memory bank so that problem areas could be identified. When, for example, the danger of fire or the danger of certain situations, our memories serve us well in warning us to flee. When the red flag waves: be out of there.

Henry Ward Beecher told the story of the young man who came to see him one day. He had made an awful mess of his life. He was telling the great pastor what had happened. Finally, exasperated when Dr. Beecher fielded each comment and exposed each excuse he gave, the young man blurted out: "Well, Dr. Beecher, what would you have done, had you been in my place?" To which Dr. Beecher said: "I never would have been there in the first place. My memory would have told me to get out of there!" You will drift downstream if you go with the flow. While, initially, memory was to protect the very life of the animal involved, in humans it broadened to preserve life and values.

But memory has a second purpose. It also retains certain persons and places and situations which are useful and friendly. It tells us by sight or sound whom we can trust. The mind remembers appearances and characteristics. It is usually not accidental that we like some people and do not like others. It is coded in our memories. Most good friends become good friends in an instant. How

you fall in love is a mystery, but a lot of it has to do with the soul and psyche's memory. Karl Jung went so far as to add, "even from a previous life." I don't know. That's enough here. The first step says: memory is important. It warns us of danger, and it recalls pleasant moments and persons.

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(2) The second step has to do with the arrival of small groups and family settings in the history of the race. If Darwin is right, that the earth developed in a survival of the fittest, individual men and women were in contest with each other. At the beginning, self-assertion, and vigorous prowess worked. It was an individual thing.

Over the long course of humankind, however, we came to realize that it was not the strongest or the fiercest who survived. Survival shifted to those who gathered together for common safety and united effort. Children could then be educated by family. From the longer view, the communities we live in: family, town, church, or club, the need to be together have tremendous value for our whole inner and outer support system. We seem to have genetic pre-conditioning to need to depend upon each other. It is not idle talk that the breakdown of the family has precipitated so much of the other loneliness and problems in the world.

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(3) Step three comes in a question: Isn't it a pity that the word we use in "That Old Gang Of Mine," once referring to your buddies on the corner, or friends at school . . . has become such a feared and awful word? We talk about motorcycle gangs, gang warfare, street gangs. A word which used to indicate warmth and joy, has turned into an amorphous presence which preys upon the world.

Frederic Trasher wrote the basic text on Gangs. Back in 1925, he concluded that when the family fails to provide security and acceptance to its young people, they move on to fulfill their needs elsewhere. The need to be together is acute. The

finger is pointing at us all: If the school or church or family fail them, where will the youngsters turn, but to each other in gangs?

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(4) The fourth step is in Book of Job, more especially the great soliloquy in chapter 29. Job's life had caved in. He had been arguing with his friends. Then, he turned to something deeper. Memories must be turned over and given to the Lord, but there is also Job to counter with this little bit of big nostalgia. He said: "Oh that I was as in the days of yore! Oh that I could go back to long ago! Oh that I knew where I might find the ones I've lost! Oh that I could get back beyond the mistakes I've made and start out again." Oh dearie me.

Then God said to Job: "That cannot be" (of course it cannot). Still He allows that it is alright to reminisce . . . to wonder what God has in mind in the passing of the decades. Job is there to tell us that memory serves a mighty reassuring function, too. (Are you listening?)

Especially if you are at a time when things are going wrong, then memory can take you by the hand. You have one whole life to live, however long it lasts. God sees it all together. He does not stop it here and there as we do. To Him all our memories and hopes are one. Memory is the means we use to tolerate the present. And, remember . . . most all of the Bible stories have happy endings.

There is a simple little way to say it: "When times are bad . . . think about the good times. When you are in the dark, think about the light. When you cannot stand the present, it's alright to think about the past." Believe in the sun, even when it is not shining. "Live for now" is only a half-truth.

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(5) The fifth step is a Bible story: After King David was driven away by Saul, he became a renegade, fighting for freedom with a small band

(We'll call it "gang") of men, who believed in him. They were up on a hill at the Cave of Abdullum, looking down upon Bethlehem, David's hometown. David recalled how cool it was to have been reared in a small town, back in the days when he played the harp, and guarded the sheep, and enjoyed himself with his brothers.

All that was gone; he was grown up and growing older. . . . He now looked down on the city sentimentally and said, "I would give anything for a sip of the fresh water from the well just outside of town." Then three men sneaked through the closed ranks of the Philistines, drew a cup of water from the well, and miraculously made it back. What devotion! But, when they gave it to David, he poured it out upon the ground as an offering to God. They were puzzled. So am I, but I think he was saying that so much had been given for that little cup of water that he would never squander it on himself. Symbolically, he meant, "I'll take all my memories, Lord, my yearnings to be somewhere else, to be young and strong, and I will pour them out before you, as water on the ground. The only life I want to live is the one I live for you just now. Sustain me where I am."

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The sixth step is personal. My mother also used to sing another little song: "I Wonder What's Become of Sally, That Old Gal of Mine." Now I don't want you to get the wrong impression of your pastor, but back when I was at Peabody High, I had an awful crush on a pretty girl named Sally. I thought about her all the time. She didn't even know it, and I could not have told her, even if I tried. Sally . . . dear, blond, beautiful Sally.

Years later Sally came to one of our reunions, still blond, still thin, still unmarried, the poor girl. I said hello (at the reunion) -- the first time I ever spoke to her. Then she left my life for good . . . good thing. . . . But I was thinking of her while I was writing this sermon on the theme of memory (Not romantically!). I was thinking of my mother's song, "I Wonder What's Become of Sally,

That Old Gal of Mine."

I don't know what's become of Sally. And I don't know what's happened to Izzie Rudoy, either, or Craig Monroe, or Eddie Berry, or Spider Herron. I heard my old friend Jimmie Davis died an alcoholic; and that Shirley Dunlop killed herself. I wonder why. She was so nice. I don't know what happened to Rona, and I heard Abby got divorced seven times. She was nice, too. I don't know what's become of any of them. They were in my life for a time, like fellow passengers in a subway car, and off they went at the appointed stops. When my mother died, current information of my old friends died with her.

"In Memoriam"

. . . .
*Our little systems have their day,
They have their day and cease to be;
They are but broken lights of Thee,
And Thou, O Lord, art more than they.*

. . . .
*That loss is common would not make
My own less bitter, rather more;
Too common! Never morning wore
To evening, but that some heart did break.
I hold it true, what'er befall;
I feel it, when I sorrow most;
'Tis better to have loved and lost
Than never to have loved at all.*

Tennyson

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(7) And, that would be an awful burden . . . until we take our closing step, number seven. I don't know what became of Sally, or that old gang of mine, but I will tell you this: God knows where she is and where they are. He knows where to find every one of them. No matter where they go, no matter where she be, God will send them back to me. Christ will guide them and hold them and keep them in His care.

The first glimpse of eternity is that our lives and

memories are held secure, in the mind and memory of God. That is what Einstein said, too. Nothing ever disappears: no act, no word, no person . . . you only need to have the proper recovery system and cast yourself out beyond it all to look back.

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Well, it's time to go. Only this to close. If God knows where Sally and Craig and Kenny are, He knows where you are, too. He knows if you are strong or weak this week. He knows if you are beaten down or on top of it all. He knows what you are worried about. He knows how sometimes we have to hold on to the edge, so we don't fall. That's for sure. What's more, the love of Jesus Christ is strong enough to keep you and me when we surrender to His loving care . . . we all belong to that old gang of . . . His! When everyone else forgets, God still remembers.

Psalm 112:6: "The righteous will never be moved; they will be remembered forever."

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Let us pray: God, our Heavenly Father, as we think about the past, guide us to the future. Take hold of us just now, that we will respond to your love, worship the Living Christ, and then go on to share His peace, until the whole wide world will be gathered together in the land of beginning again, and that all the old gangs of mine, and his, and hers, will be gathered in for now and evermore. Amen.

October 27, 1996

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