

## ***Actual Message: On Cultural Decline***

### ***Introduction:***

We're continuing to talk about things that I think, if we really consider them, can help us discern how best to navigate the many messages and news and stories that our society is sharing and talking about everyday. Last week we talked about the huge differences between Patriotism and Nationalism, words which we tend to treat like synonyms, but aren't. We noted that patriotism ought to be true of all Christians, no matter what country they live in, while Nationalism is itself idolatry, and allows no room for the very patriotic task of critiquing one's country as we Christians seek to make it more in line with all the virtues of the Kingdom of God, which of course is where our primary, permanent citizenship and allegiance lies.

### ***A Fine Line:***

And today we're cutting a similarly fine line between two concepts that we tend to treat as synonymous, but really aren't at all. One is dangerous, and can lead to idolatry and poor decisions in the present; the other is natural, and can lead to a desire to use whatever power we have for a bright future.

What we're going to do is compare what it means to have appreciation for the past, which is good, with having nostalgia for the past, which I hope we'll try to avoid as we move forward from this morning.

First, let's pray.

***Prayer:***

Prayer

***On Nostalgia:***

Let's talk about nostalgia first.

We've heard the word, right? We may or may not use it much, but we've probably heard it. Nostalgia means a longing for the past; for a time or place that for any number of reasons is positive for us personally.

Nostalgia is deeply personal. It comes from the greek for, oh, homesickness, really: feeling sick because you aren't able to return to your home.

Nostalgia is incredibly powerful, incredibly powerful, because nostalgia gets its power from what we ourselves love. Only nostalgia subverts what we love, turns what we love upside down, so that what we've loved becomes more important than the present--with

its blessings and challenges--and it becomes way more important than the future. In fact, nostalgia makes the present worthless, except for the ways it reminds us of the past, and it makes the future hopeless, unless we can somehow recreate the future in the past's image.

Nostalgia actually destroys hope, over time, because when you're deep in nostalgia's sickness, what's coming in the future, or what is in the present, can never, ever hold a candle to what has been. The only good things are in the past...but whatever else is true of the past, it's mostly true that it's gone. In that way, Nostalgia is like any addictive thing: it feels good, but only as long as you have it, and makes everything else feel worse without it.

And when we're sick with nostalgia, there are things we do. Our illness has symptoms, you know?

***We try to recreate the past around us in the present.***

We try to recreate the past around us in the present. We'll do some things that affect, basically, only us.

We'll buy things that remind us of the past, decorate our lives with things that remind us of whatever we're

nostalgic about. We'll move to places that seem more like the place we're missing. We'll also do things that try to force our nostalgic longings on others. Try to make the present more like the past by passing laws that seem to create the past around us, elect people who promise that they'll make the present more like the way things were.

***We identify someone to blame for the way the present isn't like the past.***

We identify someone to blame for the way the present isn't like the past. We see that what's around us isn't what we like, doesn't spark that personal pleasure or happiness, and we try to find whose fault it is. We rarely blame ourselves, of course. And I'll always point out that scapegoating isn't something Christians are allowed to do; for us, it ended when Jesus was scapegoated. And blame may not hurt anyone except ourselves if we stuff it, keep it secret, but blame nearly always comes out. It's especially dangerous and outright evil when we enshrine our blame for a group of people into law, and in our efforts to recreate the past around us, destroy the people who we're blaming in the present.

***Those relationships that allow us to commune***

***over some nostalgic thing become more important than those ones that help us create a brighter future.***

Those relationships that allow us to commune over some nostalgic thing become more important than those ones that help us create a brighter future. So we hunker down, find people who are sick for the things we're sick for. The problem is that some bad energy can develop in a group like this, and they can then, together, scapegoat and try to recreate the past. At best, what happens is that a group like this breeds bitterness, genuine disrespect and dislike for those who don't see how bad the present is compared to the past.

***The past is made out as a moral template for the present.***

The past is made out as a moral template for the present. Nostalgia makes the past a moral template for the present. What I mean, is that those who are sick with nostalgia talk about the good old days, talk about a better time, the way things used to be. The problem is that this is wholly personal, right? Good old days were good for us, that better time was better for us. And if not us, for people just like us, those people we talked about in the first message of this series,

those who, in a dim light, are basically indistinguishable from us at a distance. Nostalgia ends up blinding those who are sick with it to the realities of just how bad the world was for everyone who doesn't share their deeply personalized longing.

And if you add these symptoms together, this sickness becomes not just a really bad situation for a person; it becomes an energizing force in a society, something that can cause enormous evil. I think any one of these symptoms of nostalgia sickness are bad. They don't line up with Jesus way of living, or Jesus' concerns. And they're in contrast to an appreciation of the past.

Nostalgia was what drove the Pharisees to create the society Jesus was born into. They longed for the good old days, when people were better, and purer. They didn't appreciate the past; they idolized it, and believed that if they'd only only lived in the good old days, they wouldn't have killed prophets like their forefathers had.

But to appreciate something is to recognize the full worth of it. To appreciate the past is to recognize all that was good in the past. But just as an attitude of humility is honest about both one's weaknesses and

one's strengths, appreciating the past is honest about the ways the past wasn't so great--both for us, and for those who weren't us. Paul, who knew he was a "Hebrew of Hebrews...as to righteousness under the Law, blameless" knew all the strengths this gave him as an apostle; and yet, having discovered in Jesus that his present was far more powerful and godly than his past, he didn't feel any nostalgia for the days when he was so impressive. When Paul "forgot what was behind him, and pushed on for what was ahead," he was modeling a frank assessment of what we're all supposed to do when the past seems so wonderful, but the present calls us to ignore it.

We appreciate what was good about the past, seek to recreate it in the places we have influence, but having appreciation for the past is very different than having nostalgia for it. Nostalgia is a kind of illness; appreciation is the heart of gratitude, which is something all Christians are called to. And with gratitude comes good things.

***Unlike Nostalgia:***

When we appreciate the past we don't try to recreate the past around us. Instead, we allow the past to be in the past and think of ways we can make the present

even better than this or that aspect about the past was. The Jerusalem Council in Acts who came together to figure out how to include the Gentiles in the Church, rather than exclude them like they would have in the good old days, knew this.

When we appreciate the past we simply don't try to find someone to blame for the ways the present isn't like it, because we know that whatever we appreciate about the past personally, it wasn't good for everyone. Instead, we grieve that there are those who, right now, are struggling to find things to appreciate, because life is just so hard for them.

And instead of trying to recreate the past, we try to make the present as wonderful as it can be. Our energies aren't sapped with negativity; they're energized by hope. We realize that we have impact, no matter how small, and the present will someday be the future, and someday someone might be able to appreciate the past because of what we're doing right now.

Rather than being drawn to those who are full of never-ending lament about how bad things are, we're drawn to those who are full of gratitude for the good

things around them, and those who want to celebrate whatever is good in the present, instead of comparing it to some past thing that can never be measured up to.

We recognize that the past was not morally better than the present, even if it was really good for us. Instead of longing for the good old days, we appreciate what was good for us in the old days, and try to make sure it's good for everyone now.

Appreciating the past makes us responsible in our present. There were good things, back then, for us. We want good things to be here now for everyone. And so we work toward them with other people who are living in the present, not the past. In fact, the only way to have hope for the future is to avoid having nostalgia for the past, and instead, simply appreciate it for what it was.

### ***Haggai:***

In Haggai, God speaks to those who were losing heart, who looked at their hard, Temple-building work and realized just how little it was. They are tempted to dwell in the past, to take up nostalgia, just like their forefathers did when Israel was escaping Egypt, and

longing to return back to slavery, because it felt better than their present. Instead, God promises them ***‘The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,’ says the Lord Almighty. ‘And in this place I will grant peace,’ declares the Lord Almighty.***”

The workers, whose work had stalled out, were comparing the present with the past, and tempted to be nostalgic. To give up on the present, and retreat into their memories of “the good old days.” Haggai reminds God’s People that their work matters, and that all that they appreciate about the first Temple was good; but it’ll be nothing compared to the Second Temple. Their work needs to continue; they need to live in the present, drawn forward into a understanding that if they worked now, in light of the appreciation they had for the former Temple, their own children would have a future brighter than their own past.

### ***Nostalgia Dealers:***

Our society, right now, is being tempted toward nostalgia. We’ve already talked about how we’re in a time of great transition in our society. Our ways of working, our relationship to institutions--from school to

policing to politics--our increasing fracturing into tribal identity groups, the largest generation of Americans ever entering retirement and growing old. We're in a time of significant transition. And there are those who are sick with nostalgia, who believe and do the worst things that nostalgia believes and does, and they want us to be sick, too...because of course, right now, every group is constantly vying for our allegiance.

I don't want us to catch nostalgia. I want us to appreciate the past, and the ways the past was personally good for us. But we can't recreate the past around us, we can't blame those whose presence is a symbol of just how different the present is than the past, we can't try to recreate some past society, or spend time only with those who nurture lament and grief and bitterness, we can't pretend that the past was more moral than the present.

Our culture isn't declining; it's just changing. What's familiar isn't what's best, even if it feels comfortable. And whatever it looks like in a decade or three, there will be things to build up, things to tear down, and things to make more like the way of Jesus. Wherever God's Kingdom breaks in, it tests what it finds in a culture, and asks us to bear witness to what's good

and what's bad.

When Martin Luther King famously said "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice," he was reminding us, the Church, that we have power to make this world more like the Kingdom of God...if we struggle through that which denies us the expression of our power. Only someone sick with nostalgia throws their hands up in the air and gives up on the world, because of course, they've already given up on their children and their grandchildren, given up on the future, and all that they can do is remember when their own lives were more stable, easier, and kinder to them.

***A Caution:***

And look, here's a caution: there's something generational about nostalgia, right? For as long as people have been writing things down, older people have complained, more or less, that things were better when they were young. Nostalgia isn't a new sickness; we've always had it. But it is one that people who have lived longer are more prone to catching.

All this means is that we who are older--who have more things to be nostalgic about, have more past in

our life--we have a special responsibility to avoid nostalgia, even while we teach others to appreciate those aspects of the past.

### ***What to do?***

Our call, as those who appreciate the past, is to do two things:

First: Fight nostalgia. Reject it. Heal people from it, and the medicine is the hard reminder that the past was terrible for whole groups of people based on the colors of their skin, their genders, the nations they were from, the languages they spoke. It takes a lot of selfishness to say that the past was better than the present, and we Christians have been inoculated against selfishness by the Holy Spirit. It's nasty medicine to receive, the reminder that the past was terrible to a lot of folks, even if it was good for us personally. Too bad. Not all medicine tastes like bubble gum.

The other thing we do, as those who appreciate the past, is figure out how to translate the things we appreciate about it into things that exist in the present. Does this make sense? What we liked about the past, if it lines up with Jesus, ought to be in the

present and the future until his return. If we miss the days when neighbors knew each other, we ought to figure out how to translate that into the present. But keep in mind: Those who are the best translators of things are those who speak a language natively. If its, oh, the way neighbors looked out for each other that we miss, what we need to do is find someone younger than us to help make that real in our lives and our neighborhoods. They are native present speakers; we're not.

And there's a process in this, right?

***Process:***

So we identify what we miss: The way neighbors knew each other. We identify what's the core that made that thing real? Maybe, in this case, a strong sense of the way a neighborhood sinks or swims together. And then we brainstorm, ideally with someone who doesn't miss what we're missing, because they're just younger than us, how together we can bring that into thing we appreciate into the present. Who knows what we'll come up with? Maybe, in this case, it's as simple as joining our local civic organization, or setting up a free lemonade stand, or free dog treats, or something as big as creating a tool sharing program, or having a

quarterly shared meal.

This is what someone who has appreciation for this aspect of the past does. Someone who is nostalgic for this aspect of the past doesn't do this. Instead they complain about the ways their neighborhood has changed, they identify whose at fault--the immigrants, the people who don't mow their lawns, if they have no power they complain to anyone who will listen, if they do have power, say, in this example over the civic association, they make a bunch of rules that try to force the neighborhood to care for each other. But the truth of history, and the truth of free will, is that forced morality isn't moral at all; it's tainted.

### ***Test Your Reflections:***

If, when the past comes up, you think, "Yes. It was better then." We ought to remember, "better for us." We can go a step further and consider who had no freedom, no privilege, no opportunity that we ourselves enjoyed. When we appreciate not only what was good about the past, but appreciate the privilege we had to enjoy it, it's a wide open door for the Spirit to empower us to bless the present in creative ways.

Just like we teach our kids to say "I like that!" Instead

of “I want that.” We have to train ourselves to say “I appreciate this about the past,” rather than “I miss this about the past.” It’s fine to miss things, of course, and we all have to be sad at some point about the good things that are no longer.

But if missing the past is our primary relationship to it, we’re setting ourselves up for nostalgia and all its worst symptoms.

And I wonder, although there’s no space to think through this right now, if those who are sick with nostalgia are also those who are most trapped in sin; because freedom to embrace the present calls for a sense of freedom from the worst of the things we’ve done, and the worst of what’s been done to us.

But appreciate the past. This what the author of hebrews does as he lists all those great faithful role-models. He appreciates their faithfulness even as he makes it clear that these good old days weren’t good enough; they didn’t get what they were hoping for.

### ***Conclusion:***

The past is gone. The past is gone, but we aren’t. Our children are here. For many of us, our children’s

children are here, too. Let's show them what we appreciate about the past by making the present even better; let's reject the sickness of nostalgia, and its symptoms. That's no way to train up a child, or a society, in the way they should live.