

Powerful Memories

Rev. Eugene N. Nelson, Jr.
The Community Church of Sebastopol
November 2, 2014 All Saints Sunday

Hebrews 11:1-3; 8-16; Psalm 137:1-6

Gabriel Garcia Marquez wrote a novel a few years back that was both funny and frightening – *A Thousand Years of Solitude*. It is the story of a small town in South America. Through an odd series of circumstances the people in the town contract a rather strange and disturbing disease. When one gets the illness, one loses the ability to remember. Amnesia sets in. This leads to a rather comical series of adventures in which people forget the names of the farming implements they have used every day. They forget where they placed their tools the day before. In desperation they make signs. For example they hang a sign on a cow that reads, “This is a cow. This animal needs milking every day. Don’t forget!”

But the novel is also sad and rather frightening. People forget each other’s names, can’t remember their closest relatives. As we watch an entire town sink into amnesia, we realize that we live each and every day on the basis of the memory of previous days. Wipe out that memory and the world can be a frightening and chaotic place. Of all the cruel afflictions of Alzheimer’s surely this is the worst... the loss of memory, which leads to loss of family and friends, loss of self.

I once came across a piece written by Scott Momaday, a Kiowa Indian, in which he reflected on his boyhood. He told of being taken early one morning by his father to the cottage of an old squaw. His father dropped him off and left. All day long the old woman told young Scott the story of his people, the Kiowa. She told of the beginnings of the tribe at the headwaters of the Yellowstone River, their movement south into what became Nebraska and Kansas. She told of wars with other tribes, the buffalo hunts, the coming of the white man, the terrible winters as they were constantly on the move, running from soldiers. Then there was the final defeat and the forced move to a reservation in southern Oklahoma. She told the story and sang the songs of her – his – people. Said Momaday, “When I left her house, I was a Kiowa.”

I think of our Psalm for today, the sad cry of a people in exile, fearing they may never see the stars of home again: “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” And the response? “Remember.” They told their stories, sang their songs, and refused to allow their captors to erase their memories. The stories reminded them that their primary identity was not as exiles in Babylon. Their primary identity was as the beloved and chosen people of God. The memories gave them hope. The memories reminded them of all the many times God had made a way for them when there seemed to be no way. The memories shook them loose from their grim preoccupation with the present. The memories proclaimed that it was not like this before and gave them hope it would not be like this in the future. And they survived. They kept their identity. They did in fact go home again.

A while back, when our grandson, Ben, was visiting, I made some comment about the “burning bush” Immediately he responded, “I know that story!” and proceeded to tell me the story of Moses and the Burning Bush. All I could think was, “Thank God for Sunday School.” The memories of our faith are becoming his memory. The stories of our faith are becoming his story. It brought a tear to my eye. We are a people built on memory and if that memory is lost, we are lost. So of course the author of the Book of Hebrews retells the stories of Moses and Abraham and Sara for those early Christians. The stories remind them where they came from, who they are and what has formed and continues to form them as a community. Perhaps that is why I love this particular Sunday so much, never get tired of it – probably preach the same sermon every year. For in remembering the saints and the stories of the saints, all those who have touched and shaped our lives, we remember who we are, perhaps even who we are called to be. And it can be so easy to forget.

Now yes, there are traps and dangers in memory. Memory can become a place to hide. Some people, some churches, hide in their memories and refuse to face the realities of today or tomorrow, longing for the way it used to be – the good old days – even though they really weren’t that good. “We’ve always done it this way!” can be a memory that traps us in time and never lets us move on. Creative new ideas die before they are even given a chance. Memories can also

become a dark cave for nursing hatreds and grudges. People, entire cultures, refuse to forget or let go of certain things. Hurts that occurred a generation ago are spoken of as if they happened yesterday. I will never forget what she said. I will never forget what he did. We will never let go of what they did to us. And memories can be hard to trust when they get rather selective. As Fred Craddock says, "We forget about the splinters on the old oaken bucket as we brag about the pure cool water from the well where we drank as children. Trouble is, the water was never really that cold and not particularly safe to drink." And people – think our children – just get tired of us talking how great things used to be – "boring stories of our glory days" as Bruce Springsteen sang.

But acknowledging all that, all the traps associated with remembering, it is still true that memory is vital to life, vital to a community of faith. A far greater danger and trap is amnesia. I think of Scott Momaday learning the stories of his people – the Kiowa. When Indians were put on a reservation they were often forbidden by the army to sing their songs or dance their dances. The army encouraged amnesia because people without their stories, their memories, were much easier to control. They gradually forgot who they were and then accepted the white man's definition of reality as the only reality.

The world around us gives a lot of lip service to religion and faith. But the fact is that the dominant culture wants to convert us to its definition of what is true, what is real. This is all there is and all there will ever be. You are who we say you are; we will tell you what is possible and what is not. Forget anything else. You are a cog in a vast economic machine and that is what you will always be. Amnesia is encouraged. Culture will define for you what is real. Ah, but then my grandson tells me the story of Moses and the burning bush. What an incredibly subversive thing for a seven-year-old to do! I hope you understand that when Rachel and Lydia tell our kids biblical stories, they are pretty much breaking apart everything the world, the culture, tells children and youth about themselves and about what is really real. They are confronting our kids with an alternative reality, a new definition of who they truly are.

It is our sacred responsibility to hand over to each new generation of Christians our stories, to share our memories. For the stories are relentless. They celebrate possibilities which the world around us says cannot happen, they speak of a God who is not defeated and who is not even close to being finished with the world or us. They speak of a future, a hope, that is not limited by our culture's definition of reality. The world told old Sara she was barren, she had no future. But then God had another idea. A young adult shows up in worship thinking she only has a couple of options open before her for her path in life. Then she hears about a burning bush, Abraham and Sara, water turned into wine, and she sees that she has a wide array of possibilities – God-given options that she is free to embrace. Speaking of our stories, our memories, New Testament scholar Luke T. Johnson writes, "These biblical stories shatter the structure of my unbelief, my idolatrous hold on my own interpretations of the world, my own despair at the lack of the world's possibilities. They say to me: this is not a closed system but one open to its creator, whose possibilities are endless."

Yes, to be a Christian is, in part, an exercise in memory. In fact, one could say that whoever cannot remember any farther back than his or her life is an orphan. That is why we read from this book every week, read these stories that are 2000 – 4000 years old. Because we don't want to forget. We don't want to be defined by alternative stories. We want to remember the true stories about our true identity, stories that not only recall our past but also unlock the present and open us to the future. As one of my favorite authors, Frederick Buechner, writes: "What do our memories tell us? They tell us that weak as we are, a strength beyond our strength has pulled us through, at least this far, at least to this day. They tell us, foolish as we are, a wisdom beyond our wisdom has flickered up just often enough to light for us, if not the right path through the forest, at least a path that leads forward. They tell us, faint of heart as we are, a love beyond our power to love has kept our hearts alive.... To remember the past is to see that we are here today by grace, our survival a gift.... And because we remember, we have this high and holy hope: that what God has done, God will continue to do; that what God has begun in us and our world, God will in unimaginable ways bring to fullness and fruition."

"I left that house a Kiowa." May you leave this place knowing you are beloved children of God. Remember who you are!