

“The Value of Memory”
Deuteronomy 4:1–2, 6–9; James 1: 17–27; Mark 7:1–8, 14–15, 21–23
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August 29, 2021

There is a story about three elderly men with memory issues living together. The first is standing in a second-floor bathroom when he gets confused and shouts to the others, “I need some help. I have one foot in the bathtub and one foot out, but I can’t remember whether I getting in the tub or out of it.” The second man says, “Don’t worry, I’m on my way,” but halfway up the stairs he stops, saying, “I need some help. I’m on the staircase, and I can’t remember whether I’m going up the stairs or down.” “I’m on my way,” says the third man who is sitting at the kitchen table. Before he gets up, he knocks on the table and says with a sigh, “Thank goodness I’m not as bad off as them!” But then he pauses a moment and says, “I wonder who that was knocking at the door...”

Memory loss is not really a laughing matter, as those of us who have walked with loved ones down this path know all too well. But we also know we cannot cry all of the time, and humor can be cleansing. So, it can be helpful to laugh even at the most painful realities. Yet losing our memory is one of the most painful realities of all because so much of who we are, our very identity, is wrapped up in the capacity to remember — remember the people we love and who love us, remember the stories that have defined us, remember the joys and sorrows we have shared and the things we have valued most. All of this applies to who we are as human beings, and it applies to who we are as people of faith.

The biblical writers know this and thus speak often of the value of memory. Today’s reading from Deuteronomy says this. “But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life...” He is talking about specific teachings of faith, God’s statutes and ordinances that the people need to remember, but he is also talking about who the people are as God’s beloved children. In order to live faithfully, the people will need to remember all of this.

In like manner, today's reading from James says this. "But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves, and on going away, immediately forget what they were like." To forget who we are as followers of Jesus is to lose our Christian identity. We are the first fruits of God's creatures, the writer says, we are meant to be different. But we must remember this in order to be different, remember who we are.

The first logical step herein involves being clear about what it is we are called to remember, being clear about exactly who we are. James provides a few details in saying that we are people who are quick to listen and slow to speak, slow to anger. These are certainly different qualities than what we often find in the world around us where everyone tries to shout more loudly, no one seems to listen, and people become angry at the drop of a hat, or the sight of a mask, or the expression of a different opinion, or simply someone driving too slowly or changing lanes. It doesn't take much to set people off these days. We are called to have a different temperament, as we seek the best for others.

Then, James says that religion that is pure and undefiled, or as some translate, religious worship that is pure and undefiled, is this — to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. This description seems clear enough and is consistent with themes from recent weeks. There are things we don't do, ways of the world around us that diminish life and dishonor God, and there are things we do, mostly care for people in need. In the first century, widows and orphans are among the most vulnerable. We might add immigrants and refugees, the poor, the imprisoned and abused, those struggling with addictions and various mental health issues.

But in the reading from Mark, Jesus says that faith is about more than following the rules, whether we are talking about good rules, the core callings to love God and neighbor, or silly rules, rituals and habits added to the teachings of scripture over time. We need to pause here and acknowledge that washing hands, food and cooking utensils — the practice the Pharisees name as being overlooked by Jesus' disciples — doesn't seem silly to those of us

living through a pandemic. But the issue is not hygiene, it is ritual cleanliness, the accumulation of requirements added to the law over time. What matters more than all of these rules is what is in our hearts, Jesus says, because who we are deep- down shapes the way we live, whether we extend kindness to all or not.

There was a man in another setting who wore nineteen pins on his lapel every Sunday. Long ago, as some of you may remember, anyone who attended Sunday School every week for a year would receive a perfect attendance pin. This man had not missed a Sunday in nineteen years, and he wore his pins proudly, a sign of his faith, at least by one superficial measure. I offer this qualification because when we hired an African-American woman as organist and choirmaster, he quit coming to church. All those years in Sunday School, following the tradition of the elders, what good did it do? Either he never really understood who we are, what is supposed to be in our hearts, or he had forgotten.

But the truth is we all forget at times; we all have moments when we lose sight of our peculiar identity as those who follow Jesus in a life of extending love and kindness to all. Sometimes we just follow the crowd almost unconsciously and act like the people around us while other times we choose to speak or act in a way we know isn't us. Sometimes we choose a destructive path while other times we just fall short of our true identity, perhaps settling for less than we can be or acting only in self-interest. But we all forget who we are at times.

Pastoral care professor Wade Rowatt shared a story about a time he forgot who he was in a sermon he preached on love at Broadway Baptist Church, in Louisville, Kentucky, when I was on staff there in the 1980s. That week he had gone to the mall in St. Matthews, where I was co-owner of an athletic store. It was a large and busy mall then, but it is massive now — think Crabtree Valley Mall, only bigger! The parking lot was crowded, as usual. He was having trouble finding a spot when finally, he saw a place, but just as he started to pull in, a car came flying around the corner from the other direction and beat him to it!

You can probably guess where this story is going... and perhaps relate to it... Dr. Rowatt felt his blood pressure rising, he was furious! He rolled

down his window and prepared to launch into a well-deserved tirade... when a sweet-looking elderly woman — who might have been his mother or a fellow church member — got out of the car and started walking slowly toward the mall. Fortunately, he caught himself before he spoke the first angry word, but he immediately thought, “Here I am preparing a sermon on love, Christlike love, being patient and kind, not insisting on my own way, not being irritable or resentful... and I’m about to scream at an older woman over a parking place.”

Have we not all had such a moment? Have we not all forgotten who we are, whether we acted on our feelings or not? This is not to say others don’t sometimes do things to test our patience. When a professor at Southern Seminary a very long time ago apologized for his behavior at an associational meeting, he said he hoped he would never again in anger literally jump from the dais down to the first pew to confront someone in an argument — he did this at a church meeting — but he also said he hoped no one would ever say or do something to make him that angry again.

Sometimes we are provoked, and often we feel like we have had all we can take, like during this pandemic... Will some people ever do the right thing and help us get over this?! But no matter what someone else says or does, we are called to be who we are.

The key is that something happens to remind us of who we are, to awaken us to our true identity. We will all forget, but like Wade Rowatt, can we catch ourselves before we go too far? Or can something or someone else catch our attention and call us back?

I think of the scene in Disney’s movie *The Lion King* where young Simba hears his father’s voice speaking from a cloud, telling him that he has forgotten who is his, he is more than he has become. After feeling responsible for his father’s death and fearing for his own life, Simba has run away from his home and responsibility, and developed a pretty good life with new friends. “Hakuna matata,” they sing, no worries. And there is nothing wrong or bad about this life. It’s just that Simba has been born for more — to be king. The spirit of his father wants him to remember this, and, of course, eventually he does — this is a Disney movie — because of this encounter.

We may not hear any voices from a cloud, but the Spirit of our Father/Mother intends more for us than we often experience. The key is that something awakens us to this reality, something provokes us to claim our true identity — our own conscience, an insightful question or comment by a friend, a book we read or movie we see, a song we hear. Even as a church, there are times when we might lose sight of our identity and calling. The process we began Wednesday night, facilitated by the Dream Team, is designed to remind us of our shared identity.

Something happened to remind my friend with nineteen years of perfect Sunday School attendance. I don't know if someone said something to him, if his conscience got to him, or the fact that no one joined his boycott opened his mind, but after a month, he came back to church, and after the service, with tears streaming down his face, he told our new organist and choirmaster how wonderful her music was. I have often thought of the Grinch in relationship to this man. His heart grew several sizes. That's what happens when we remember who we are.

In his award-winning novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* Gabriel Garcia Marquez describes a village where people have been infected with a contagious kind of amnesia. It begins with older members of the community but works its way down to the younger folk until all the people are forgetting the names of common objects. One young man decides to attempt to limit the damage by putting labels on everything. "This is a table," "This is a window," "This is a cow; it has to be milked every morning." On the main road at the entrance to town he puts up two large signs. One reads, "The name of our village is Macondo." The other, the largest of all, reads, "God exists."

Memory is a sacred gift; for who we are is wrapped up in the capacity to remember. What do we want to make sure we do not forget? That God exists, that we are loved and nothing can separate us from that love, that we are called to live in a way that helps others know the kind of love we have known in Christ. May we take care and watch ourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that our eyes have seen nor to let them slip from our minds all the days of our lives.