

5 Lent, Year B Jeremiah 31:31-34 John 12:20-33
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Memory is a funny thing. Sometimes we are frustrated by our lack of memory and at other times we would give anything to forget something, to no longer remember it, because it brings us pain, or guilt, or remorse. Those of us who are long time Episcopalians and can remember the Rite I Holy Eucharist, may remember the words of the Confession where we repent earnestly, and say we are “heartily sorry for these our misdoings; the *remembrance* of them is grievous unto us, the burden of them is intolerable.”¹

But what if we aren’t able to remember? In the time before I was a priest, I was engaged in a ministry with the elderly, and more specifically with those who suffered from Alzheimer’s disease. Memory loss can seem like a loss of self, can indeed seem like a death, and so our reactions to memory loss are much the same as those of grief after an actual death. Who *are* we if we cannot remember? This question may unsettle us as we care for our loved ones, or begin to fear our own loss of memory.

Today, Jeremiah is reminding me of my time spent in the memory care facilities. As I remember my time there, it brings up feelings of sadness at the loss these children of God experience. But it also brings up feelings of gratitude for some of what they do *not* lose. Many are able to love, laugh, and tell stories, even if they cannot remember they told you the same story yesterday, even if they cannot remember their spouse who visits faithfully, *even if* they cannot remember who they are or where they are. But what over and over brings me the greatest joy and delight when working with these dear ones, is that more often than not, they *do* remember God. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann refers to this as the core memory of the heart.

What I have witnessed is that even when those with dementia cannot remember anything, they can often sing “Jesus Loves Me”, say The Lord’s Prayer, and join in reciting familiar scriptures. They are noticeably comforted by worship and prayer and can often be engaged in conversations about God. Though they have lost much memory from their minds, they have a core memory *that has been written on their hearts*.

Israel had a core memory about God: that God will do today, in this bad circumstance, what God has done in the past. God will give a new covenant, a new relationship, a new creation.²

Jeremiah was a prophet in the time before, during, and after the Exile of Israel to Babylon. This passage, from a part of Jeremiah called The Book of Consolation, describes the New Covenant and God’s determination to take control of the relationship between God and Israel once and for all. Too many times Israel forgot God’s covenant with them, forgot the Law written on stone tablets. Too many times Israel had strayed and broken God’s heart. Yet God’s love is endless and there is no determination like God’s. Because Israel could not keep the covenant, God promises them a new covenant. God is clear that this new covenant will not be like the former one, and it differs from the former in several ways, but perhaps what is most significant is that “it

¹ BCP, p. 331. Italics mine.

² Walter Brueggemann, referenced by Kate Huey, UCC Sermon Seeds weekly commentary.

is brought into existence, ratified, not by a sacrifice or any pagan ritual practice but by God's decision to forget – to forget Israel's sinfulness, betrayal, and infidelity. God does not just pass over, absolve, or forgive this time around, God also forgets, erasing even the memory of the breach in their relationship: for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more."³

For some of us, knowing that God will forget is a great relief and a saving grace. We can all think of some things that we would just as soon forget. Maybe we are holding onto past wrongs inflicted on us by others, or some things we have said and done that we wish we could erase from our memory, and certainly from God's memory! Perhaps that is how Israel felt. After a life of slavery in Egypt, after years in the wilderness, after years of being subjected to the whims of conquering, neighboring nations, they simply could not forget how often they had ignored God, had refused to trust God. Yet, they repeated this pattern of faithlessness over and over again. Israel too must have prayed "we are heartily sorry for these our misdoings; the remembrance of them is grievous unto us, the burden of them is intolerable."

"And so God does what Israel cannot: God forgets. In response to their failure, God refuses to recognize it. In response to their infidelity, God calls them faithful. In response to their sin and brokenness God remembers their sin no more."⁴ God has written a new covenant of love on our hearts to remind us that when we are caught in that pattern of faithlessness, or when we don't remember who or whose we are, that we are indeed, in the core of our being, children of God. God will forget our misdoings but God will never forget us. This is what it means to have God's law of love, forgiveness, and grace written on our hearts.

Take a moment to recall a memory of something you wish God would forget: an unkind word or deed said or done to another. Perhaps it's something from the past that only you and God know about, something you regret. Hold that memory in your right hand.

Now, take a moment to recall one thing that you wish *you* could forget: something someone said or did that is still painful for you, a betrayal by a friend, a disappointment you cannot let go. Hold that memory in your left hand.

Hold them lightly these two things that need forgetting by God and by you. And as I read this passage again, and you hear about God's intentional forgetting, see if you can let go of the thing in your right hand that you wish God would forget, *because God already has forgotten it*. And as you leave here today, take with you that painful thing in your left hand that you cannot forget. Spend some time this final week before Holy Week working to let go of that thing you wish you could forget. And even if you cannot do this right away, or very well, remember that God's grace is abundant and that God has promised to do what we cannot: to forget.

Listen now to what God is saying to us... as you hold these heavy memories in your hands... But this is the covenant that I will make, says the Lord: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from

³ David Lose, writing at Working Preacher in 2012.

⁴ Ibid.

the least of them to the greatest,” says the Lord; “for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.” Amen.