



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker
May 27, 2018 Sermon

Lest We Forget: In Living Memory

Scripture Lessons: 1 Chronicles 16 (selected verses); Matthew 28:16-20

If any one faculty of our nature may be called more wonderful than the rest, I do think it is memory. There seems something more speakingly incomprehensible in the powers, the failures, the inequalities of memory, than in any other of our intelligences. The memory is sometimes so retentive, so serviceable, so obedient; at others, so bewildered and so weak; and at others again, so tyrannic, so beyond control! We are, to be sure, a miracle every way; but our powers of recollecting and of forgetting do seem peculiarly past finding out.—Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*

But anyone who loves God needs no tears, no admiration: he forgets the suffering in the love. Indeed, so completely has he forgotten it that there would not be the slightest trace of his suffering left if God himself did not remember it, for God sees in secret and recognizes the distress and counts the tears and forgets nothing.—Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*

Preface to 1 Chronicles reading:

“Remember and do not forget.” That’s one of those set verbal formulae that gets repeated over and over again in the Bible. “Remember and do not forget.” And that it is repeated so often tells us something, namely, that people, God’s people, were prone to forget and needed to remember—remember that they were God’s people, that God was with them, that God had a plan for them.

This was especially true in times of change, in transition from one season to the next, when something new was beginning. The passage I’m about to read—from 1 Chronicles Chapter 16—describes one such time. King David, is moving into his new capital city, Jerusalem, and bringing the ark of the covenant—the sacred, gold-covered wooden chest which contained the Ten Commandments and other sacred objects, and which symbolized God’s abiding presence with the people—before him.

Listen for how the people are told to remember God, and all that God has promised and done for them. But listen also for how God has always remembered—and never forgotten—God’s people . . .

Homer’s *Iliad* is over 15,500 lines long; Homer’s *Odyssey* over 12,000. And they memorized every line—the “rhapsodes” who travelled around Ancient Greece—memorized all 27,500+ lines, and then recited every word—performed—for five, six, straight evenings at a time.

Ah, human memory!

In national and international memory competitions, competitors are given 15 minutes to memorize otherwise unknown names and faces. Then, they are shown sheets with only the faces, and asked to recall the name (first and last) that goes with each face. Of course, the faces on the question sheets are in a different order than on the original memorization sheets. You have 30 minutes. Someone named Simon Reinhard remembered and matched 181 names and faces.

There are several other events in the competitions, as well: the reigning US memory champion, Alex Mullen, memorized 3,000 decimal digits in one hour.

Ah, human memory!

So there I was, in Dorothy Lane Market a couple weeks back, and there you were—a member of Westminster: I remembered you, lots of things about you: your face, where you sat on Sunday mornings, lots

of things about you, even what you said to me after worship this past Sunday. But your name? I just couldn't remember it. I'm sorry.

Ah, human memory!

Then, when I got to the checkout line . . . I had forgotten my Dorothy Lane card. "Phone number?" the cashier looked at me. Now I've had the same phone number—the same ten-digit phone number—for some 13 years now. Not 3000 digits in one hour, but ten digits over the course of 13 years. I've said my phone number—given it to someone—on the phone, in person, at the doctor's office—who knows how many thousands and thousands and thousands of times; entered it (I'm sure) on thousands and thousands and thousands of forms—both paper and electronic. I looked at her blankly, "Hold on a second," I said, and pulled out my own phone to look up my own phone number.

Ah, human memory!

If any one faculty of our nature may be called more wonderful than the rest, I do think it is memory. There seems something more speakingly incomprehensible in the powers, the failures, the inequalities of memory, than in any other of our intelligences. The memory is sometimes so retentive, so serviceable, so obedient; at others, so bewildered and so weak; and at others again, so tyrannic, so beyond control!

So wrote Jane Austen, the 19th-century English novelist.

So tyrannic, so beyond *our* control. *Unbidden*. They come back to us unbidden, memories—the smell of hyacinths in spring, of freshly mown grass, of bacon frying downstairs, of your old high school gym—whatever the trigger, the memories come rushing back, unbidden. And always, always with feeling, often with the same feelings—but sometimes with different ones than what we felt at the time. What was once a source of terror and trepidation, we now remember with laughter and amusement . . . high school gym class, in my case. In the midst of particularly difficult experiences, we say, "Someday, we'll remember all this and laugh."

To put it altogether, memory is perhaps the most representative of all our human capacities and abilities. In other words, in memory, we see most clearly the qualities that all our other capacities and abilities have—that peculiarly human combination of power and weakness, greatness and fragility, responsiveness and unresponsiveness, control and lack of control, feeling and thought—so close to us, so much a part of who we are, and yet so mysterious. In fact, in memory, we can see not only the qualities of all our other capacities and abilities, but all the qualities that make us human. In memory, we see most clearly who and what we are as human beings.

Jane Austen again: "*We are, to be sure, a miracle every way; but our powers of recollecting and of forgetting do seem peculiarly past finding out.*"

So close to us, so much a part of who we are, yet so mysterious. Memory—and memories—make us what we are—in general as human beings but also as particular, unique, human beings.

The key to happiness, someone once said, lies in remembering and forgetting. What we remember and forget—and more important, *how* we remember and forget—goes a long way to deciding how happy (or miserable) we are, and the kind of people we become. We all know people who hold on to certain memories and never let them go, with fixed and determined, despairing and embittering, anger; that's what defines their lives, makes them who they are. And we also know people who can find the good in—learn from, grow from—every experience, no matter how painful, with hope, living hope; that's what defines *their* lives, makes them who *they* are. The key to happiness lies in remembering and forgetting.

Now, in saying this, I'm not saying "Just put a smiley face on everything, it's all good, forget all the bad, and just be happy." It's more complex than that. We all have difficult, hard, painful memories—they're part of our lives, part of who we are. The question is, "What do we do with them?" *How* do we remember them? And most important, what lessons do we learn from them? The real danger is not that we learn the wrong lessons—although that is a danger—the real danger is that we forget to remember what we must remember.

Lest we forget. Lest we forget. That's what we engrave on the plaques under the names of those who died in our wars, that's what we inscribe under the statues in our town squares, that's what we say at our Memorial Day services. *Lest we forget. Lest we forget.* And it means "so that we don't forget": so that we don't forget their sacrifice, their bravery, their goodness, their lives—what they fought for and what they died for. That's why we put up the plaques, erect the statues, and hold the services—Lest we forget.

And that's all true and good. But it's more complex than that.

John Prine—you may know him—if not, he's an old singer-songwriter. A singer-songwriter's singer-songwriter, something of a cult figure, admired by—his songs often covered by—many, more famous, singer-songwriters. His songs have a way of being both funny and sad at the same time. One of his earliest, from back in the 1970's, tells the story of a veteran, Sam Stone, coming home from Vietnam, not to acclaim and appreciation, but to neglect and even scorn, with (in Prine's words) "a little shrapnel in his knees, a purple heart, and a monkey on his back." The heart of the song is the chorus, which begins with a line from the perspective of Sam's young child, "there's a hole in daddy's arm where all the money goes." And then, if that line weren't heartbreaking enough, we get, from Prine, this line: "Jesus Christ died for nothin, I suppose."

Johnny Cash couldn't bring himself to sing that line. He wanted to cover the song, but he couldn't bring himself to sing that line, so he asked Prine if he could change it, and Prine said "yes," because . . . well, because it was Johnny Cash.

John Prine himself is a believing Christian from a Christian family, and he has said that no line he has ever written upset his family—upset as many people—as that one. But he also said that he had to write it: he had to sing the sadness of Sam Stone's life, and that was the saddest line he could imagine.

Nowadays, we remember those who are serving—or have served—in our military by having them stand up at ballgames to our applause, letting them get on the airplane first, and then, saying to them, as we get off the plane, "Thank you for your service." And that's good—it shows we've learned some lessons from—haven't forgotten some of the wrongs of—Vietnam. But it's not enough. We also need to remember what we're subjecting them to, what we're asking them to face, when we send them off to war: the terrors of modern war. Nobody, nobody—in the in the midst of the terror of a car-bomb exploding in Afghanistan—nobody says, "Someday, we'll remember all this and laugh." Nobody.

And when they do come back home, their memories come with them, too, unbidden, with the feelings; in the middle of the day: when a siren sounds, or a car door slams, or when something goes bang at a nearby construction site, the memories come rushing back, unbidden, with the feelings; in the middle of the night, the memories come back, unbidden, with the feelings: in nightmares and cold sweats, with the terror that not only haunts but kills, that can't be forgotten.

We need to remember that, too, so that we don't make the same mistake again, sending men and women off to fight and die for folly: for nothing more than political ambition, vanity, and lies. The real danger is not that we draw the wrong lessons—although that is a danger—the real danger is that we forget to remember what we must remember. *Lest we forget. Lest we forget.*

Memorial Day began as a holiday to decorate the graves of Civil War veterans. That was now many years and many wars ago. But go back and look at the photographs—those early, primitive photographs—of the dead covering the fields of Gettysburg, go back and look at them, and then try—just try—to multiply that out by all the battles and all the wars, all the killing fields and all the gas chambers. That sad, sad line, that saddest of all lines, might then come to you, too: "Jesus Christ died for nothin, I suppose."

Everyone has felt it; at some time or another, every person of any thought and feeling, every person of any faith or of any inclination to faith, has felt it. Jesus himself felt it. He cries from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" In other words, he's saying to God: "Jesus Christ died for nothin, I suppose."

But he didn't. That's the message of Easter, and now that Easter season is over, that's what we need to remember and not forget. He didn't die for nothin; he died—and lives—for us.

Through the prophet Isaiah, God asks us this:
*Can a woman forget her nursing child,
or show no compassion for the child of her womb?*

And then God reassures us:
*Even these may forget,
yet I will not forget you.*

Lest we forget. Lest we forget. God does not forget us. God remembers us. We live in God's memory. Our lives, our longings and loves, our joys, hopes and dreams, our heartaches and our sufferings, the number of hairs on our heads, our genetic codes—all of them, all of us, live in God's memory, live in God. In him, we live and move and have our being. God remembers us and does not forget us. Not the soldier dying on the battlefield; not the woman dying in the memory care unit of the nursing home; not Sam Stone dying alone (Prine's words again) "in a room smelled just like death, with an overdose hovering in the air." They are not alone. We are not alone. None of us is. God is with us. In Jesus Christ—who lives and reigns and rules forever—God is with us. Remember this and do not forget.

Of course, as we begin to see God, to live in the light of God's glory, and to live into the love of God, we do have a human tendency to forget. Not to forget God, but just the opposite: to forget everything else *but* God. To get so caught up in that joy of knowing God, in knowing and believing that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ promises that, one day, that joy will be made complete and ours forever, to get so caught up in that that we are prone to forget everything else, especially our own sufferings and hardships. In the love of God, for the love of God, our memories of those sufferings and hardships, (in the words of the old hymn) fly forgotten as a dream dies at the opening day.

So we *may* forget our suffering, but God doesn't. Soren Kierkegaard puts it this way:
But anyone who loves God needs no tears, no admiration: he forgets the suffering in the love. Indeed, so completely has he forgotten it that there would not be the slightest trace of his suffering left if God himself did not remember it, for God sees in secret and recognizes the distress and counts the tears and forgets nothing.

God counts the tears and forgets nothing.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away . . . And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,
"See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away."

This Memorial Day weekend, as we transition into a new season, remember this and do not forget: He lives, and we live in him. In Jesus Christ, God is with us.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.