

When Memory Fades, God Doesn't Forget

Deuteronomy 26:4-11; I Corinthians 11:23-26

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Should auld acquaintance be forgot and never brought to mind? Should auld acquaintance be forgot and days of auld lang syne? While many of us sang that song on New Year's Eve, we weren't serious about what it means. It's helpful to be reminded that *auld lang syne* means "long long ago" or "olden days" For the most part most of us don't want to forget the old days.

In 2001 my step-dad died of Alzheimer's disease. Well that's not completely accurate usually something else kills you, but before breathing his last, his memory was pretty much gone, but for recognizing his immediate family. I'll witness to you, like just about anyone who has gone through this experience, it's painful to watch a loved one lose his memory. It means essentially losing a sense of who they are and what life means. It's tough. Sure some joke about it, because that's what we do with uncomfortable feelings, but in reality what scares folks most, when it comes to aging, is the thought of losing memory, of forgetting kid's names, of becoming a victim of dementia that erases life's memories.

When you think about it, most sickness just deprives you of the present. You get sick, feel miserable, see a doctor, recover in time and what do you lose? Maybe a couple days of school, some paid time off, a kid's school concert or soccer game, but really nothing more than a few days of the present. Terminal illness does rob you of the future. Alzheimer's slowly steals the past. Memories of relationships, events, of loved ones slip away. In 30 years of ministry I've watched memories fade and gotten use to re-introducing myself to folks I've known for years, just to save them the embarrassment of not knowing who I am.

I don't think there is anything we value more than memory. We don't want to forget old acquaintances or "auld lang syne." Oliver Sacks in a book, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* said: *You have to begin to lose your memory, if only in bits and pieces to realize that memory is what makes our lives. Life without memory is not life at all... Our memory is our coherence, our reason, our feeling, even our action. Without it we are nothing.* Memory and history are central to who we are and to faith.

In my former church, I led a weekly worship at the county nursing home. During the services we sang lots of the golden oldies many residents knew by heart. We let them name the songs, my music directors would play the piano and we'd sing. There once was a woman named Annie who attended every service. Annie's eyes were always closed, head down. She couldn't even remember the last song we sang. But there was something remarkable about her. You could tell she had sung in a choir, there were remnants of a trained voice. She often sang harmony. Most remarkable, though, was that she usually knew most of the words by heart. The piano would play a few bars and her head would rise up and she would start singing at the top of her voice. She hadn't forgotten the hymns. Annie could still sing "The Old Rugged Cross" and "I Come to the Garden Alone" and "Just As I Am" and "Blessed Assurance, Jesus is Mine." This isn't

unusual for folks with Alzheimer's but I believe it's a testimony to the vitality of faith, even when memory fades. Ask a person with severe dementia to recite the Lord's Prayer, or the 23rd Psalm, and with a little prodding you will be surprised how much can be seen silently mouthed by lips. This is a bold reminder that when memory fades, God's love is forever. God never abandons us, even when the memories we value most are lost. God never lets us suffer alone in confusion. God is still there because we are part of God's history.

A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien...” but the Lord didn't forget them, the Israelites remembered as they offered first fruits of their harvests. The Israelites knew they played an important role in God's unfolding, salvation history. God would never forget them and so they remembered. This morning we come to the Lord's Table and we hear the Jesus words: *This is my body broken for you, do this in remembrance of me. This is the cup of the new covenant in my blood.*

With Alzheimer's Disease the individual's memory is at stake. The worst part of the disease is that it diminishes individual identity. We tend to believe we are what we remember: a mom, a dad, doctor, carpenter, teacher, jokester, minister, coach or farmer. Our stories remind us who we are. Tragically, sometimes succeeding generations think it's tedious to hear the same stories repeatedly told. It's like we don't want to be bothered by another's history, especially the elderly, and so seniors are left alone hanging desperately to their stories.

This is so different from the Bible's notion of memory and history. In the Bible collective memory and community history are more important than individual identity. Even when an individual couldn't hold on to memory, the community did. This is counter-intuitive to almost everything in our North American, transient, individualistic, consumerist, throw away, culture. Our culture demands self-sufficiency, is more interested in me, myself and I and my bootstraps, and mostly frowns on community identity, interdependence and a responsibility for each other's physical, spiritual and mental well being. We prefer Sinatra singing “I did it my way.”

Christianity is a faith of a community. As Christians this means as a person's memory fades, we are called to maintain her story as part of the collective whole. This means that while our memories fade in our fragile humanity, God's love, the God who is Lord of all history, the Alpha and Omega, God's love is forever and God doesn't forget.

As a community of caregivers we are called to collectively keep the stories of those who suffer from memory robbing diseases. How? Caregivers can become more than givers of care, they can become keepers of memory by telling stories that have been forgotten. This keeps the story alive in community. For my step-dad this meant I stopped asking him questions. You see, my questions only reminded him of what he couldn't remember. Instead of asking questions I initiated conversations, telling him “I remember when” stories he and I shared at the cabin, with dogs, hunting and fishing. This meant I carried the conversation, talking about his friends who were no longer alive, talking about his grandkids, Phil and Amanda, and what they were up to. This is often where we miss our best opportunity to remind a loved one they are still part of our story.

It means that we do familiar things with them like praying the Lord's Prayer, reciting the 23rd Psalm and singing old hymns. Because short-term memory tends to go first, it means sitting and listening to the same stories told and letting names get mixed up. Sometimes our first response is irritation, we even get angry and shut them down, I know, but this is when it's important to put your self aside and to simply listen, prompt and learn. After all, many of the stories concern times when you were not around. If they are lost, then they are gone for good from your collective history.

Friends in Christ, I know how frustrating it is when a loved one's memory fades. Sometimes it's important to back away from it and to pay attention to yourself. It's important to realize and be aware of those feelings because they become not only a part of your history as a caregiver, but of the relationship between you and the one you love.

Finally, I want to say it is also possible to speak of God's memory in this light. Whether the individual remembers, or even whether the community remembers for the individual, our Christian faith declares God remembers. God's memory is unfailing, even for the person who is totally lost. Even when memory fades, God's love is forever and God never forgets.