

Head and Heart Memories

Psalm 105:1-11

Oliver Wendell Holmes, the eminent United States Supreme Court justice in the early 20th century, was on a train reading his newspaper when the conductor came by punching tickets. The justice searched his coat pockets for the ticket. Then he looked in his vest pocket, then his pants pockets. Each time he came up empty. Finally, the conductor who recognized him said, “Justice Holmes, don’t worry. I’m sure the great Pennsylvania Railroad won’t mind if you send your ticket to us when you find it.” The distinguished jurist looked up at him and responded, “My dear man, the problem is not where is my ticket? The problem is, where am I going?”

I can relate to that and many of you probably can also. For the past few years I have been experiencing the usual forgetfulness issues of where I’ve put things. I will wander around the house looking for my glasses, which I had just moments before. At times, in my frustration I will try to blame one of the little dogs for swiping them. That doesn’t work because they refuse to own up to it. Now and again I will try to put it off on Susan, but she just rolls her eyes at me and reminds me again that a neck chain might prove helpful. It must be vanity, but I just can’t bring myself to wear glasses slung around my neck, proving once again the validity of Pogo’s dictum, “We have met the enemy and they are us.”

More recently I have been experiencing the “What am I doing here?” syndrome. I will purposefully walk from one room to another and then forget why. That is somewhat scarier than forgetting where you laid something down. At other times I will have a thought about something I had intended to remember, but then can’t recall it. Then there is the word recollection issue.

Finally, in this litany of forgetfulness, there is the quandary I can find myself in trying to remember a person’s name. A few weeks ago I was in the Rifle City Market and bumped into a former parishioner. “Hi, Ken,” I said, exchanging a hug. “How’s Margie?” With him was his adult daughter from Denver. She and her husband, along with Ken and Margie, had traveled with us for two weeks in 2007 on a tour we led entitled *Paul’s Fourth Missionary Journey*. Two weeks! I looked at her and drew a complete blank. “Hi there,” I exclaimed excitedly as I hugged her. “How are you doing?” The three of us had a nice conversation standing next to the bananas. Later in the day I suddenly remembered her name – Barbara, and that of her husband, Eric.

All of this has led me to think about memories and remembering. In the opening chapter of John Irving’s novel *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, the narrator says, “Your memory is a monster; you forget – it doesn’t. It simply files things away. It keeps things for you, or hides things from you – and summons them to your recall with a will of its own. You think you have a memory; but it has you.” Sometimes it seems that way, doesn’t it?

I’ve thought about the kinds of things I forget and the things I remember, and have concluded that there are head memories and there are heart memories. As we age we tend to begin to forget the head memories. I don’t have a heart investment in my glasses, or why I go from one room to another. Those are head things. But the truly meaningful events in my life that have touched my heart are intact. We are all aware that as we age our short-term memory begins to fade, but our long-term memory continues to stay with us. For the most part, short-term memory is head memory, while long-term memory is heart memory. We also know that for many elderly people, Alzheimer’s and dementia finally remove all memory. When we see it in a loved one, we grieve for them and for ourselves, and we quietly pray it won’t happen to us. But we also know the body and mind are finite.

We have individual memories and we have collective memories. Our families have a shared past. It is why we have photo albums, or nowadays, photos on CDs, and why we celebrate birthdays and anniversaries. Photos remind us of past events that we’ve shared with loved ones, triggering a flood of memories. It is why, when a fire destroys everything you have, the loss of family photos is the most devastating.

We also have a shared past within our country. It forms an important part of our national identity. It is why we have federal and state holidays and memorials. They serve to remind us of those events in our individual, collective, and national lives that have substance and meaning. They are heart memories. It is why the Jewish people will not let the world forget the Holocaust, not why we cannot forget our roots in democracy and freedom.

If you think you have memory problems, you should have been around a few thousand years ago and watched Israel's meltdown. They chose to forget about God and his covenant. They were deeply sinful and worshiped false idols. They lost sight of what happened to Moses, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The psalmist sought to help them remember how faithful God was to them, even in the midst of their unfaithfulness to God. Psalm 105 begins with a call to worship: "O give thanks to the Lord, call upon his name." Verse four enjoins us to "seek the Lord" and in verse five we are told to "remember the wonderful works he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he has uttered."

As people of faith, we are called to come, seek, and remember all that God does, not just for ourselves, but as the psalmist adds in verse one, we are to "make known his deeds among the peoples." In other words, we are to leap onto the stage and join in the drama. There can be no such thing as a passive Christian. Such is an oxymoron. We must remember God and his mighty works, and share the good news.

This is precisely what separates the Judeo-Christian faith from all other faiths. Ours is a faith that is based on events rather than just on words. Buddhism is founded on the thoughts of Buddha. No particular events are associated with Buddhism, other than the Buddha sitting under the Bo Tree of Wisdom. It is questionable whether Buddhism can even be called a religion, because it is non-theistic in its beliefs. But all of it is based on sayings, not events. It is the same with Islam, which takes its credence primarily from the words of Mohammed. The many cults of the world are likewise founded on the words and exhortations of one individual rather than on historic events.

The Christian-Judeo faiths trace their truth through historical occurrences – actual events in the lives of the patriarchs and matriarchs, the prophets and kings of the Old Testament. For we Christians, the events in the life of Jesus in the New Testament are of primary importance – his birth, ministry, suffering, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and then Pentecost with the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. It is, therefore of the utmost importance that we remember these events. Psalm 105 invites us to do just that: "Remember the wonderful works he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he has uttered" [v. 5].

In my introspection about memory this week, I came to realize that all of my experiences of God that moved me in new life directions are intact. They are the many events in my life in which God touched my heart, and I knew God was there. Although I am getting older, I can say with the psalmist that I do remember the wonderful works God has done.

In a class at Vancouver School of Theology, Fred Ferre [Fair-ray] told about his famous father, Nels Ferre, the theologian and author. Nels was thirteen when he left his home in Sweden to come to America. The departure was an unforgettable experience for him. The family had prayer, and then they all walked to the train station, where Nels boarded the train. As the locomotive whistle blew signaling the train's departure, Nels leaned out the window and saw his mother running along the locomotive platform yelling, "Nels, Nels, remember Jesus! Remember Jesus!" Nels' mother could think of no more important parting words than those: "Remember Jesus!"

Whatever happens to our memories in the aging process, and despite what others may perceive about the loss of our faculties, I believe that inwardly God allows us to always remember Jesus, and the wonderful works God has done with us. And for that miracle that involves heart memories we can be most grateful. For God is good, all the time; and all the time, God is good! Amen? Amen!

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 24 July 2011