

August 30, 2009
The Cure for Forgetfulness?
Genesis 40-41

My memory is getting worse! In fact I wrote part of this sermon then promptly forgot to save it! I would like to blame it on old age, too much worry, the time of the year ... but I can't. I just don't have a great memory. I need to write things down and make lists. I need people to remind me to do things. I even give people permission to "nag" me from time to time.

Having a bad memory is a problem. Nothing hurts more than being forgotten. Remember picking teams for softball at lunchtime back in elementary school? The superstar athletes were picked first. Others were picked early because they were part of the "in" crowd. The two captains who did the picking - the most popular kids of all - did that throw-the-bat-in-the-air-fists-and-scissors thing to pick who would bat first. Somehow David Richardson's team always batted first and Terry Clark's team was always in the field. Sometime during the first inning someone would notice that two or three of us had not even been picked yet. We were quietly kicking at the turf along the third base line, quite forgotten, and feeling as worthless as the dirt ...

Forgotten ...

Remember Joseph? He is rotting away in an Egyptian jail - quite forgotten. He had been sold by his brothers into slavery and forgotten. As Potiphar's slave, he had risen to a pretty reasonable standard of living. Then Potiphar's wife had noticed that he was "well-built and handsome" and tried to seduce him several times. Joseph refused. Hurt and angry she accused Joseph of attacking her. Unjustly accused, with no trial, he was thrown in prison ... and forgotten.

In prison, Joseph meets two equally unlucky characters - the baker and the cupbearer to the king. One morning both are glum: *"We both had dreams but there is no one to interpret them"* (40:8). Joseph, blessed by God with some unusual abilities, is able to interpret their dreams, and does so with the simple request that when the cupbearer is restored to his position that he remembers Joseph and helps him (40:14). The cupbearer is miraculously pardoned and returns to royal favour, but *"he did not remember Joseph; he forgot him"* (40:23).

Nothing hurts more than being forgotten. But notice the pattern that is becoming evident in Joseph's life. His brothers sell him into slavery - he is forgotten. But he doesn't whine, lose hope, or give up: he works hard, with integrity, with respect - God is with him; he and Potiphar are blessed (Genesis 39). He is unjustly accused and thrown into prison - he is forgotten. But he doesn't whine, lose hope, or give up: he works hard, with integrity, with respect - God is with him; he, the warden (39:23), and the cupbearer are blessed (Genesis 40). *"When two full years had passed,"* Genesis emphasizes, *"Pharaoh had a dream ..."* and the cupbearer finally remembers Joseph! God is with him; he, Pharaoh, and all Egypt are blessed (Genesis 41).

Even though Joseph may be forgotten by his own brothers, by Potiphar, and by the cupbearer,

God never forgets him. Whether Joseph was still with his family, in Potiphar's house, or in chains before Pharaoh, where is God? With him! God never forgets His people. He never forgot Joseph. He never forgets you! That is good news for us to hear. God never, ever, for one moment, forgets one of His own people! He never ever, for one moment, forgets you! *"I am with you always,"* says Jesus, *"even to the end of the age"* (Matthew 28:20). *"Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies?"* asks Jesus. *"Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid, you are worth more than many sparrows"* (Luke 12:6-7). God remembers us! That's good news!

What we cannot forget ...

But also remember Joseph's attitude and actions through the roller coaster of his life. This story is about God remembering us, but it is also about us remembering God!

Remember when Jesus was asked, *"Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"* (Mark 12:28). How did He answer? *"The most important one is this: 'Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no greater commandment than these"* (Mark 12:29-31).

Do we remember God? Oliver Cromwell once prayed, *"O Lord, should I forget You this day, please, I pray, do not forget me."* I have to admit there are days when I forget Him. Some days I get up, keep very busy, accomplish a few things (most trivial, a few moderately important), work my way through 12 or 16 hours And never really give God a thought. If I pray at all, it is a quick little thing before a meal - but I can even forget that. If I read Scripture, it is dull and routine.

I feel badly. I never want to forget God! I do want to begin every day with Him and keep my life focussed on Him all day. I do want to love Him with all my heart, mind, soul, and strength: I really do! I believe with all my heart that God became human in Jesus to teach us, live for us, and die for us. For each of us. For you. For me. That is an incredible expression of love. It is the ultimate expression of love - given for you. Given for me. How could I forget that? But at times, I admit, I do.

I find I need - consciously and diligently - make an effort to keep God at the beginning, middle, and end of every day. I need to remember to pray - and discipline myself to do it. Thoughtfully. Reflectively. Meaningfully. I need to remember to read God's Word - and discipline myself to do it. Thoughtfully. Reflectively. Meaningfully. I need to remember to desire and ask for God's wisdom and guidance - and discipline myself to do it. Thoughtfully. Reflectively. Meaningfully.

Do we remember other people? Remember Joseph! His brothers resented him - sold him, and forgot about him. Potiphar was angry - never did look for truth - got rid of him and forgot about him. The cupbearer was just so busy with his restored life that he forgot about Joseph. Are you ever resentful? Who do you not like? How does that affect your relationship? Are you

ever angry with someone? Do you know the whole truth (or just one side of it)? How does that affect your relationship? Are you just so busy with life that there are people who have fallen by the wayside? Sometimes it's just a case of out-of-sight-out-of-mind. Sometimes we form our relationships simply by who-can-do-something-for-me - networking - and ignore people who have no "value" to us. Sometimes we're just too busy.

There is nothing worse than being forgotten.

There is nothing better than being remembered.

Jesus said, *"If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching ... My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you"* (John 14:23, 15:12). We are to love each other as Jesus loves.

Unconditionally. Absolutely. Sacrificially. Forever. Not forgetting. Jesus does not say we are to judge others. He does not command us to criticize them. He does not ask us to gossip about them. He does not encourage us to complain about them. His command *IS* to love them.

That's what's important to remember.

We need to remember who we are. As people of God - as a church - we need to remember the important things. Why are we here? What is our purpose? We are here to love God, through worship and discipleship. We are here to love our neighbours in the name of Jesus, through service and caring, compassion and justice.

Being a Christian - being a church - is not that complicated. Love God. Love your neighbour. That's who we are. That's what we're about. That's what's important to us personally - and as a church. If we want to be about the Lord's work (and I trust we do) we need to ensure that our focus - personally and corporately - is on God. And we need to see and live a fundamental commitment to loving our neighbour - in the church and in the community.

Choosing to forget ...

Did you know that God doesn't remember everything? Oh, He could if He wanted to. But he *chooses* to forget certain things. When we confess our sins, He chooses to remember them no more (Isaiah 43:25, 44:22). He chooses to forget them. That is part of the mystery and wonder of God's forgiveness. It is complete. Absolute. My first reaction - as a fairly good person - is that that's great for me! I'm very thankful God chooses to forget some issues from my past.

But it's not fair that God would forget other (worse) people's sins. There are some people whose sins God should remember (not mine, of course)! But God chooses to forget: *"Though your sins be red as scarlet, they shall be white as snow."*

Joseph chose to forget, too. After his interview with Pharaoh, Joseph's life is good -again. He names his oldest son, "Manasseh" (which sounds like the Hebrew word "forget"), *"because God*

has made me forget all my trouble ..." (41:51). How good are you at forgetting all your troubles? It is difficult, isn't it? Note Joseph says, "God has made me forget ..." God chooses to forgive and forget our pasts. Can we forgive ourselves? It may take the grace and ministry of the Holy Spirit to help us overcome those memories.

What do you need to forget?

Even more significantly, the Spirit can help us forget the hurt and pain others have caused us. God forgets our sins against Him. In Matthew 6, Jesus teaches us to pray (a passage we know as 'The Lord's Prayer'): *"This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, as we also have forgiven those who have sinned against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.'"* (6:9-13). Immediately, Jesus adds, *"For if you forgive others when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins"* (6:14-15). This is the only phrase in the prayer Jesus comments on ... why? Perhaps because it is the point on which many of us stumble! But we need to let go. We need to move on. We need to ask God to help us forgive and to make us forget (just as Joseph did).

Who do you need to forgive? Whose sin do you need to forget?

Too often I remember the things I need to forget. And I forget the things I need to remember. I live life inside out - not a pretty picture! Instead of remembering God is always with me, I remember the things I worry about - they are always with me. Instead of spending time praying for others, I nurse wounds and stew in resentment. Instead of celebrating and enjoying God's presence, I rush about in a panic trying to get too many trivial things done.

I need to live life right side out - a much prettier picture! I need to remember God is always with me; He never forgets. I need to remember that - what ever I am doing - I can do it from a heart that loves Him. I need to remember to love my neighbour as myself.

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