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Holy Forgetfulness
Ash Wednesday, Year B
February 17, 2021
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I was 27 years old and spending the summer in the Twin Cities working as a hospital chaplain. The idyllic summer of Minnesota with its endless bike trails, each glistening lakeside complemented with an ice cream stand, the farmers' markets bursting with tomatoes and rhubarb and fresh-cut flowers -- these things I held in one hand, while the other held the experience of the hospital, its air-conditioned sterility, full of questionable heart murmurs and long struggles with COPD, the way that the lives their faded like those fresh cut flowers. "Our days are like the grass," the psalmist sang, "when the wind goes over it, it is gone." But this one particular night was my first time feeling that wind in the same room as me, as it carried a man away as quietly as a breeze catches the last clutching leaf of autumn, almost as if the words of the last rites I had said for the very first time had had a commanding effect on his lingering soul.

I pedaled my bike into the late evening, fury without purpose, unaware of where I was going until my feet stopped me at the little neighborhood bar. The logical corner of my brain that still worked chirped that I really needed to eat something as it steered my shaky feet to the bar stool.

I ordered the food of grief, a cheeseburger and a beer, and sat in the crowded room, concentrating on blending into the grain of the wooden bar, envisioning myself as a carved extension of the wooden stool I sat on, when the older woman in a tanktop and visor next to me asked, "And what beer is it you're drinking?"

I reluctantly named the Minnesota brew, then made my tired quip that I was on a local-only beer diet that summer. She laughed and started to tell me about herself. I sighed inwardly. She's a lonely old lady, and I'm always a chaplain. Let me hear about how the neighborhood's changed. How your dead husband loved this place. How you worked as a nurse for your whole life. And what about me, what did I do?

I'm actually working at a hospital, too. A chaplain.

"Oh," she said delightedly, "A female chaplain! You know, I worked as a nurse for over 40 years — this was back before women could really be doctors." And she proceeded with her life story, and I was perfectly camouflaged into the grain of the dark wood. As she wound around, she looked up suddenly from the reverie and asked, "Now how about you? What do you do?"

I startled momentarily, but a chaplain meets you where you're at. I repeated, "I'm working at hospital as a chaplain right now, but I hope to be an Episcopal priest after I finish seminary."

"Oh, a female chaplain, that's so wonderful," she said. "You know, I was a nurse for over 40 years in this town," and she retold to me, as I barely held on to my non-reactive credentials, her whole life story. "And what about you? Tell me what you do."

I felt myself emerging from the woodgrain slightly, taking form and flesh. “Well, ma’am, I’m a chaplain in a hospital, and I’ve only been there for a few weeks, and it’s been hard — how were you a nurse for so long?”

“Oh, honey. It wasn’t easy... Some things you never forget — but some of them are the best things, too.” And she told me about being a nurse.

“And what about you, dear? What is that you do?” And finally, I splintered apart, my lacquered surface exploded into raw shards, my throat tight, “Ma’am, I’m a chaplain, I’m so glad I’ve met you today, because I just watched a man die for the first time and then I walked away, and I’ll go back to work tomorrow, and I’ll never see that family again, but I’ll never forget them.” And I confessed to her my deep and secret fears.

When I exhausted the list, she peered at me from under her visor with a look of pity. “You’ll be okay,” she pronounced as her absolution. “Give yourself time,” she advised for my act of penance. “Speaking of,” she continued, “I was a nurse for over 40 years.”

This was my first confession to another human being. Later that school year, I would learn the art of hearing the confessions of others. There was trepidation among us future priests. What if a parishioner’s sins were bad enough that we could no longer look him in the eye as we greeted him in the pew? God could forgive, but could we? Our experienced guide was unconcerned. “You fear it,” he said, waving the thought away like it was a leaf on the wind, “but that won’t happen. You would be surprised at how banal and pitiable our personal sins are to an outsider. But more than that, God gives us a gift when we hear confessions, and this gift is a holy forgetfulness.”

The gift of holy forgetfulness is one that comes from the very heart of God. It is what God does. The psalmist sings that our transgressions are removed from us “as far as the east is from the west,” which is, of course, an infinite distance. They are not packed nicely and neatly into a manageable corner of a forgotten closet. They are gone — maybe not from your mind as they swirl in your head in the vulnerable hours of night, but forgotten by the one who matters, the one who removes them, God. It’s God’s holy forgetfulness that we call on and trust in on this day particularly.

But I should mention that holy forgetfulness is a practice you could consider for this Lenten season. It seems like this could be a gift for this time, where we even get to add weather into the over-full category of Unprecedented Events, for this time when we reached the ends of our ropes six months ago with everyone around us and ourselves. It seems right to remember that we are forgiven only insofar as we have extended forgiveness to others. With Lent, the gift could be exercised as a practice, it could become a part of you, so when a fragile soul sits down next to you on their very darkest evening, you’ll be ready to hear, and to forgive, and to forget.