

Sermon for the 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

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I've confessed here before that you should be very grateful that Ardelle edits all these sermons before I inflict them on you. But I was hesitant to have her read this one. You might say it's a sermon about the art of forgetting. And she knows better than anyone that for me to preach about the virtues of forgetfulness is akin to an alcoholic holding forth on the merits of gin.

Why, just last Sunday the Calvary banner was missing from this room, because the night before I'd been tasked with hauling it to the beautiful liturgy for the feast of the Martyrs of Memphis at St. Mary's cathedral. If I were a bookie, I'd have put the odds of my remembering to bring that banner back after the service at one in five. Those are probably optimistic. Whatever the odds, I didn't beat them and the Calvary banner hung in the cathedral nave for an extra week.

But forgetting is every bit as necessary to our lives as memory is. Consider Jorge Louis Borges's fantastical little story "Funes the Memorious." Ireneo Funes had a memory problem too, you see. But his was very different from mine. Ireneo, son of the town ironing woman, was thrown from a half-tamed horse. The fall left him paralyzed. But when Ireneo regained consciousness, something had changed. He found that he suddenly remembered everything. Literally. He remembered everything from all 19 years of his life up till then.

"We," the narrator explains, "can perceive three glasses on a table; Funes...knew by heart the forms of the southern clouds at dawn on the 30th of April, 1882, and could compare them in his memory with the mottled streaks on a book in Spanish binding he had seen once, and with the outlines of the foam raised by an oar in the Rio Negro the night before the Quebracho uprising."

As someone who regularly looks for his lost eyeglasses in the refrigerator, because there really is no telling where he might have laid them down, Ireneo's gift sounds divine to me. But it was diabolical.

After his fall, you see, Ireneo could no longer think of anything in general. Every leaf, every stone, every square inch of anything he'd ever gazed upon was lodged in the great and expanding garbage heap of Ireneo's mind. His memory was so oppressively perfect, that to sleep, he had to imagine houses on the newly built streets to the east of his own. Houses he had never seen, which he would imagine as black, compact, and made of homogenous darkness. Only then could Ireneo turn his mind from the world, and sleep.

We may wish our memories were better. But "Funes the Memorious," is a strange reminder that forgetting is every bit as essential to life as memory. We have to forget to go on. At least sometimes we do. At least some of our memories must go.

We might say that in the parable Jesus tells in response to Peter's question about forgiveness turns on two forgettings. Jesus commends one of them to us. He commends the less convenient one. But it's not only for the sake those around us that he does.

Peter's question and the parable Jesus tells in response are among the most memorable in the gospels. What's interesting is that the question comes on the heels of last week's gospel reading, which began with Jesus saying, "If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone..." Remember that one? Jesus says that if you've been wronged by a friend, don't pretend to forget it. Go to the person with your hurt so you can reconcile. And if that doesn't work, bring two or three others into the conversation, and if that

doesn't work, bring in more people and if that doesn't work you may need to set some boundaries. The passage seemed to be about how to keep a sin from festering in a community. It ended uncomfortably with Jesus saying that if the person still won't be reconciled to treat them like a Gentile and a tax collector. Treat them as someone who is no longer part of the community. But maybe you remember how Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors. He got in trouble regularly for eating and drinking with them, apparently in hopes that even these despised outsiders might one day be brought fully into the community of grace.

Since Peter's question today comes right after this teaching in Matthew, to me it seems like a moment when the stone headed Peter actually understood what Jesus was saying. He got that to treat someone like a Gentile or tax collector was not to give up on the possibility of restoration. It was simply to describe the lay of the land truthfully. A relationship has been ruptured. The offender really has stepped beyond the bounds of community. Now it's time to figure out how to go get them, like that one lost sheep that scampered away from the ninety nine.

So, Peter, understanding that the previous story just means it's time to start the reconciliation program Jesus designed specifically for Gentiles and tax collectors, asks whether there's a limit to the work of forgiving. "Would this go on up to even seven times?" he asks. Jesus says multiply that by seventy and you're in the ballpark. And I'm pretty sure the takeaway was not intended to be that on the 491st infraction, Peter would be free to give the jerk what he had coming all along. You see, if you've been keeping careful track of somebody else's sins and you reach seventy times seven, you've got a memory problem, my friend. In fact, these sins have probably stayed alive and at work in this world precisely by getting so deeply embedded in your head, don't you think?

The story Jesus tells is just as famous as the arithmetic in his reply. He tells a parable about a slave who owes a king ten thousand talents and cannot pay. The slave begs for mercy for himself and for his family, and the king has pity upon the man and forgives the debt. This is the first forgetting of the story. The man is in debt. The king says, "Forget it."

The story turns when the man does just that. He forgets that he's just been forgiven, and he has a fellow slave, who owes him a pittance compared to his own freshly canceled thousands, thrown into prison. Jesus says, "I want you to forget like the king forgets. Not like the slave forgets."

I'm not going to say much about the threat of divine judgment at the end of the story. It's startling, of course. But remember that Jesus is in full on parable mode, and he's talking about what goes on in our hearts and our heads much more than he is about how God responds to our foibles. I'd actually argue that since the forgiven man has turned from his forgiveness and reentered a world of judgment, he's choosing to live in a universe in which harsh judgments are the controlling rule. And it won't go well for that guy.

But here's the question the parable poses to us. What do you need to forget? And what do you need to remember? Do you ever find yourself remembering and ruminating on some hurt you know you need to be set free from somehow, and forgetting the many gifts and graces that have arrived in your life since the first breath you drew this morning? I sure do.

Lewis Hyde wrote a quirky and beautiful book with the splendid title "A Primer for Forgetting." In one of the vignettes he says this: "[In Greek mythology] the Furies are embodiments of unforgettable grief and rage. *Their names are Grievance, Ceaseless, and Bloodlust. Their names are Grudge, Relentless, and Payback. They bloat the present with the undigested past.* They harry the sleepless mind, demanding blood for its release."

Do you know these Furies? These demons? I do. It seems that for all that's changed in the world since the days of antiquity, the mind of an ancient Greek worked in ways that are very familiar. At least they are to me.

Elsewhere Lewis Hyde quotes the 13th century Japanese teacher Dogen Zenji, who wrote, "To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to become one with the ten thousand things." And the longer I'm alive, still trying to study and understand the self through the teachings and spirit of Jesus, the more I'm convinced that the work of forgiveness Jesus lived and taught was not about bearing down and forgiving people so that we'll avoid the judgment of God. He wants to set us free from sin. And we can't be set free from sin, whether the sins we've committed or the sins that have been committed against us, unless we learn what and how to remember, and what and how to forget.

What we get in return really is the ten thousand things. What we get in return is a mind filled with the ten thousand talents we've been forgiven of or the ten thousand gifts I tend to ignore while my mind spins and spins and spins on things I've done and left undone, or worse, the things done and left undone to me.

Mind you, I'm not commending the way of Jesus in lieu of a good therapist. Quite the opposite. If psychotherapy or spiritual direction or a regular walk or cup of coffee with a friend you can be utterly truthful with helps you, as Emerson put it, stop "...drag[ging] about this corpse of your memory," that work is holy work. That work is healing work. That work is Jesus's work.

What I am commending is that practicing the way of forgiveness in Christian community is why a Christian community like Calvary exists at all. What this work requires in a particular time and place and life can look very different. It may mean mustering the courage to tell someone they have hurt you in ways you can't forget all by yourself. Or, since Jesus told a story about a slave, I'll say that the work may involve remembering the names and the stories of people who were enslaved on this very block, in the shadows of this very church, and possibly, over time, having the name and story of their enslaver loosen its grip on our collective memory.

What do you need to remember? What do you need to find some way to forget? Ultimately, none of us can answer this for another. But all of us have a role to play in this particular community of Jesus's redeeming work, which is to break the power of sin in our lives and in our world, at least in part, though the healing work of forgiveness on our memories.