

Forgive & Remember

E.F. Schumacher argues that what defines human life is how we go about reconciling opposites: love and justice, freedom and responsibility, law and gospel, forgiveness and accountability, patience and urgency.

All of these pairs contradict each other and yet somehow we need to find a way to embrace them all. There is no formula for determining how to do this. There is only the faithful walking the path between the opposites in the light of God. Much of what critics view as contradictions in the Bible are simply attempts to help us learn how to walk in faith between these opposites.

I spoke a couple of Wednesdays ago about the importance of remembering. Of how crucial it is to hold on to the past. We are drawn to God by faith, and faith is not possible unless we have some reason for believing. The reason for believing in God is the memory of what God has done in the past. Which is why the Bible insists, relentlessly, that what God has done must never be forgotten.

Today's readings steer us to the opposite side of the road. They emphasize the importance of letting go of the past. This is actually one of the more common themes in the New Testament. 2 Corinthians 5 says, *"If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation."*

In Revelation 21:5, the voice of God says, *"See, I am making all things new! The former things have passed away."*

So how do we go about reconciling these opposites? How do we remember the past and at the same time let go of the past?

There was a popular movement in Christian churches a number of years ago called WWJD: what would Jesus do? In the case of these opposites, we are treated to an example of WWGD in the Old Testament. What would God do? How does God balance the need to remember the past with the need to let go of the past?

This is the dilemma that Jeremiah 31 deals with. In this passage, God has been pondering the failure of the covenant God formed with the Israelites. This agreement was supposed to be the basis of a lasting, loving relationship. It spelled out what God and the people God created would do to keep that loving relationship strong.

As long as both sides remembered what this covenant was about, all was good. There was no reason why this relationship should not work. The Bible is emphatically clear that God does not forget; God has proven to be completely trustworthy in that regard. At the same time, the many things God did for Israel were so astounding that it was hard to imagine they would ever forget.

Unfortunately, the Israelites experienced catastrophic memory failure. That caused them to break the covenant, which ruined the relationship that God had worked so hard to bring about. Okay, now what does God do to those who have trashed this carefully devised plan and treated this relationship so poorly?

Is God going to get even with them for what they did? Will God carry a grudge against them from now until the end of their lives? Is God going to end the relationship altogether? Will God, in the name of justice wipe out the whole lot of them and be done with them altogether?

It was not an easy decision, even for God. Many of the prophetic books of the Bible, particularly Hosea, depict God in anguish over what to do about this.

Jeremiah 31 reports the final answer that God arrived at: *I will make a new covenant*. God decided that what happened, happened. That was in the past and God refused to be dragged down through all eternity by this unfortunate turn of events.

But this was not a case of forgive and forget. Some people think that two words always go together. Myth #1: you cannot truly forgive unless you forget. Despite conventional wisdom, that's not what the Bible says. In Jeremiah, God showed how important it was to forgive and remember.

In reaching the decision to forgive, God relied on heavily on memory. Memories of how much God loved these people. About how much God enjoyed sharing creation with them. Memories of the times when the relationship actually worked, when love flowed back and forth between them, and how wonderful that was. These memories told God that this relationship was worth salvaging.

God also remembered, very clearly, the pain that came with the breaking of the covenant. Memory reminded God what the Israelites are capable of—how unreliable they had proven themselves to be. That it would be naïve not to take this into account in further dealings with these people.

God did not forget any of what happened in this failed covenant, the good or the bad. Both were part of what prompted God's decision to let go of that old covenant, as important as it was. What was important was the future, and how was God going to move on from this?

In Jeremiah, God brought out a new approach. An approach that honored God's past loving relationship with Israel while also remembering the difficulty they had living up to their promises.

"I will put my law within them; I will write in on their hearts, and I will be their God and they will be my people. They shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity."

That is how God proposed to build something new out of the ashes of the old. It all started with forgiveness. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting all of the wrongs that have happened to us, or that we have done to ourselves. After all, much can be learned from those experiences. What it does say is to stop hauling all this baggage around with us. And we do that by forgiving.

Forgiving is not forgetting; it is letting go. Forgiveness is the act that somehow manages to accomplish two contradictory tasks—it lets go of the harmful, corrosive things of the past without forgetting those things that should never be forgotten, and thereby makes possible not just a new future, but a better future.

Letting go of the destructive past without forgetting those things that should never be forgotten is not something we are typically very good at. That is why we have been using a different confession for our worship in Lent, which is from Prince of Peace Lutheran in Burnsville, MN.

It recognizes how important letting go is to the act of confession and forgiveness. It speaks of the importance of letting go of those things that drag us down, whether these are material goods, patterns of behavior, or feelings.

"We confess that we are people with clenched fists. We hold tightly to the things of this world and are unwilling to part with them. We hold in our grasp the residue of our past life and we are afraid to give it up. We feel life slipping through our fingers and we don't know how to change."

Unclenching our fists is a difficult act for humans. How many of us bear scars or feelings of resentment over wrongs done to us in the past? Over not getting the recognition or material benefits or success we deserved or worked so hard for? How many of us cling tightly to memories of rudeness, slights, insults, and even pain we have suffered at the hands of others?

How many of us just cannot let go of mistakes and failures we have made in the past, replaying moments that we wish to God we could have over again? And what is the price we pay for hanging on to these things?

There are many wise sayings in our world that speak to our inability to let go of the things that harm us.

From Ann Landers, "Hanging on to resentment is letting someone you despise live rent-free in your head." From Dale Carnegie, "Constantly reliving the past is like sawing sawdust."

From Eastern philosophy: "Holding on to anger is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die from it." Or from major league baseball, "You can't steal second with your foot stuck on first."

The futility of trying to live a good life while clinging to the past is a common theme in cinema as well. *Indiana Jones & the Last Crusade* is a good example:

As our heroes try to escape with the Holy Grail, the cavern they are in starts crashing down around them. A chasm opens in the ground. The precious Holy Grail that they have worked so hard to obtain falls into it and is temporarily lodged. Elsa keeps reaching for it, her perch growing more and more precarious as the fissure widens.

Unable to let it go, she finally falls to her death. Drawn by the lure of the grail, Indiana starts to make the same mistake until his father finally persuades him: *Let it go and save your life.*

That is exactly what forgiveness accomplishes. It is foolish to forget the past and all the things it has taught us. But it is equally foolish to drag it around with you. Forgive the past, whatever has been done to you so that you can be freed from its paralyzing grip.

This leads to myth #2 about forgiveness. There must be repentance before there can be forgiveness. Certainly confession and expressing remorse are important in any relationship. Confession is taking responsibility for our actions. Saying we are sorry is a crucial step in repairing a relationship that we have harmed or broken.

But what about the times when we are hurt by those who are not interested in repairing a broken relationship? By those who either do not admit fault in hurting us, or do not care that they did?

I once had a meeting in my office with a man who was tormented by those questions. A number of years earlier, he had been greatly wronged by the actions of another, who either did not know about the harm she had done, or did not care.

This wrong continued to bother the man. There were times when it was so much on his mind that he could not sleep. He knew what Jesus said about forgiveness. He had tried but he just could not do it. It bothered him greatly that he was unable to forgive, and he wanted some advice as to what to do about it.

The crux of the issue was, is it possible to forgive someone who does not express any remorse? Not only is it possible, but it is necessary.

That does not mean it is easy to do. But forgiveness is not a one-way street, a case of showing love to our neighbor, that benefits only those who are forgiven. Forgiveness is letting go. And even if a person is not ready to receive forgiveness, the forgiver needs to let go. To have that burden of the past lifted.

There is a folk legend about a bird that lived the free and joyful life. Like many other birds, she floated in the sky, catching mosquitos for lunch, basking in the warm sun, and splashing in the summer rain.

But somewhere along the line, she picked up a habit: every time some unpleasant event occurred in her life, the bird picked up a stone from the ground. Every day she sorted out her stones, remembering the event that each represented.

The bird always took the stones with her; whether she was flying in the sky or walking on the earth, she never forgot about them. The years passed, and free bird got a lot of stones, but she still kept on sorting them, remembering the past. It was becoming more and more difficult to fly, and one day a bird was unable to do this.

The bird that was free some time ago, could not walk on the earth, she was unable to make a move on her own. She could not catch mosquitos anymore; only

rare rain gave her the necessary moisture. But the bird bravely endured all the hardships, guarding her precious memories.

After some time the bird died of the starvation and thirst. All that remained of her life was a pitiful bunch of worthless stones.

Forgiveness is not forgetting; it is letting go. As God showed in Jeremiah, forgiveness frees us from the burdens of the past and leaves us free to focus on the future and new life.

I had never thought of it in this way before, but this gives a new perspective on God's forgiveness. To be sure, God displays unconditional love because that is who God is. God forgives out of love for God's fallible creation. But God also forgives because God is wise. Imagine God is that bird, carrying around the stones of everyone who hurt God.

I was talking recently with someone who still held to the old belief that a person who commits suicide cannot go to heaven, because they never have a chance to ask forgiveness for what they have done. Imagine God having to go through life carrying all the stones of those God could not forgive.

I can't imagine God making that mistake. God forgives, not just for our benefit but because it is good for God to do so. God remembers the past but does not cling to it. Forgiveness frees God from the burdens of the past, and leaves God free to focus on the future. Free to make all things new, to bring new life to a creation that seems stuck in the past. Free to shower love upon the world.

Two suggestions for putting this sermon into practice for Lent. First, do the traditional Lenten thing. Remember what God has done in the past. Remember what you have done in the past. Where you see harm that you have done to your relationship to God and to your neighbor or to your self? Confess it, apologize for it. Then accept God's forgiveness, leave it in the past, and move forward free to live as God created you to live.

Second, go back in your memory. What wrongs have been done to you that you are carrying around? What is it that you need to let go of to be free to live a new life in Christ. Ask yourself, what is it I need to let go of?

Then, with God's help, let go of it.

Lord, help us all to do this. Amen.