

“An Appeal to Memory”

Luke 20:27-40

All Saints’ Sunday

November 6, 2022

Westminster, Greenville

Ben Dorr

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Our sermon on this All Saints’ Sunday is about memory.  
Speaking of memory, Daylight Savings Time ended last night.  
Which meant we gained an extra hour of sleep.

Those of you here this morning, looks like you remembered to set your clocks back...but I suspect someone forgot, or will forget, and will show up at 10:15a this morning for our 11:15a service.

It’s nothing to be embarrassed about.  
It’s just...memory.

Sometimes we remember what we’re supposed to remember.  
And sometimes we don’t.

I’ll never forget the story that a young couple in one of my former congregations once shared on a Sunday morning. This family of four, with two young kids, they arrived at worship that day well after worship had begun.

You could tell when they entered the back of the sanctuary, that they looked a little frazzled, that something had been going on.

After worship, we were milling about the Fellowship Hall, and I asked how they were doing. The father said, “We’re fine now. But when we left for church this morning, we got about 2/3 of the way here, and my wife—after looking in the back seat of the car—she turned and looked at me, and she said, ‘We have to go back home.’”

I said, ‘Why do we have to go back home, we’re nearly at church?’

She said, 'We forgot Aaron.'

Aaron was the name of their 5-year-old boy.

In their rush to get to church, they had gotten their youngest child in his car seat, and managed to leave their oldest child at home.

So...when they got back home, Aaron was sitting on the front steps of the house, and he told his parents that if they hadn't arrived to pick him up in the next five minutes, he was going to march over to their neighbors' and ring the doorbell and yell until someone helped him.

I was impressed that they made it to church at all that morning...

Do you remember what our sermon is about this morning?

Memory, good.

Your memory is working right now.

Memory is what our Gospel reading is all about today.

In our story from Luke, Jesus is being bombarded with questions. Hostile questions. Testing questions.

The religious leaders are trying to trap Jesus,  
to make him look dumb.

So along come the Sadducees, who do not believe in the resurrection. And they're going to prove Jesus wrong!

They pose a hypothetical scenario for Jesus.

A woman is married seven times. Each time she's married, her husband dies, and each time she's married, there are no children. Then the woman dies. That makes 7 weddings, 8 funerals, and no children.

Jesus—in the resurrection, whose wife will she be?

They're hoping, of course, that Jesus will say, "Fellas, that's a good one. You got me there. There must not be a resurrection."

But instead, Jesus responds with an appeal to memory.

It's the first story we heard today.  
Do you remember the first story we heard?  
Moses meeting God at the burning bush.

And Jesus refutes the Sadducees on TWO LEVELS.

On the first level, Jesus says that their belief about no resurrection is contrary to their own scripture. It's INCONSISTENT with what God says to Moses:

"I am the God...of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."

From which Jesus points out that God "is God not of the dead, but of the living..."—in other words, Sadducees, stop trying to prove there is no resurrection, because your own faith history, your own sacred text implies that there IS a resurrection.

But this isn't just an argument about how to read the Bible.  
There's a SECOND LEVEL at which Jesus answers their question.

In the story that the Sadducees tell, these 7 brothers are passing this woman, from one to another, as if she's property. As one scholar notes, "Husbands in the first century had something like property rights toward their wives."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted from "Jesus' Final Exam," a sermon by Thomas G. Long, found in *Sermons from Duke Chapel: Voices from "A Great Towering Church,"* edited by William Willimon, Durham: Duke University Press, 2005.

It's as if the Sadducees are saying, "She's owned by seven men. Now tell us, Jesus—in the resurrection, whose property will she be?"

And Jesus responds with the story of Moses.  
What happened with Moses at the burning bush?

God told Moses that Moses was going to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. The Israelites—who were slaves at the time, who were someone else's PROPERTY at the time—would be free.

Do you see the parallel between the imaginary story the Sadducees invent, and SACRED story that Jesus asks them to remember?

The Sadducees ask a question about a woman who, in their minds, *would be owned* forever and ever and ever. And Jesus reminds them that this is NOT the way God works.

When God enters the picture, what's in bondage is set free! And they should know that because it's a part of their own faith story, when their ancestors were slaves in Egypt and set free by God!

In other words, Sadducees, you're forgetting what your own faith story tells you about God!

This hypothetical woman whom you call a piece of property is, in fact, a DAUGHTER of God, says Jesus. A child of God! And even if she goes through life never being recognized for who she really is, God will NOT let it end there. In the resurrection, she will be claimed by God and called by God as God's beloved child.

What Jesus is really saying to the Sadducees is something like, "Fellas, how could you forget?"

“How could you forget that it is God who gives us our identity, who calls and claims us as God’s very own?”

The problem with the Sadducees is not inadequate DOCTRINE. It’s **faulty memory**.

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All of which is fine and good, but what does that have to do with All Saints’ Sunday?

Let me make this suggestion:

What if the saints of our lives are those who help us remember—when our own memories get faulty, and we forget who we really are, the saints those people whom God sends us to help us remember what a gift life is, to help us remember who and whose we are...

Have you ever had someone in your life remind you who you really are?

I’m thinking this morning of a WWII veteran I used to know named Lynn.

Lynn was a member at one of my former churches.  
Lynn was a remarkable person.

He served his church in countless ways.  
Chairing the property committee.  
Chairing a capital campaign.

Building things for the kids in their Sunday School classrooms, like Noah's Ark...building it on a smaller scale, but building it to scale, according to the measurements recorded in scripture.

I knew how Lynn had served his church, but it wasn't until I officiated at his funeral that I read the astonishing autobiography that he wrote, late in life, and learned a good deal more.

Lynn grew up in the depression.  
His house had no electricity, no running water.

When he played baseball as a child, they couldn't afford a real baseball, so he and his friends would take a golf ball, wrap string around it, and that was their baseball.

He was an engineer, and when he went to fight in WWII, his job was to build bridges. There was one in particular that he and his fellow soldiers built on the Moselle River in France in 1944...

This was five months after Lynn landed in France, on D-Day.

The river was flooded and the approach was covered with 58 inches of water. "We were harassed with both mortar and artillery fire," Lynn wrote "but finally succeeded in completing the bridge."

So then Lynn falls asleep on the muddy ground, because he hadn't slept for 72 straight hours. About 2 hours later, a Sergeant wakes him up to tell him that the bridge that he just built has been hit by artillery fire.

The bridge had torn loose, and was floating down the river.

So Lynn immediately leads his men in constructing two ferries to carry tanks, tank destroyers, and supplies across the river in order to build a second bridge. THAT PROCESS took 36 hours!

That's 2 hours of sleep over the course of approximately 110 hours, but finally, the second bridge is built. And there are 7 miles of vehicles waiting to cross this bridge.

Lynn gave the order to let the vehicles start to cross when out of nowhere, a scout car came down the far bank, going the WRONG WAY on the one-way road they had created. In other words, that car was about to prevent those 7 miles of vehicles from crossing the bridge that it had taken 110 hours total to build.

Now when I served as Lynn's pastor, I never saw Lynn get angry. But at that moment in 1944, with only 2 hours of sleep over the course of over 4 ½ days, Lynn had had enough.

And he runs across that bridge, he's shaking his fist, he's screaming at the scout car...and who was the person who got out of the scout car when he saw Lynn coming toward him?

None other than General George Patton.

Well.

What happens when a mere captain runs across a bridge screaming and shaking his fist at General Patton?

As Lynn put it, "I expected 'rest & relaxation' in the brig in England...and at that point, it didn't sound too bad."

But to Lynn's astonishment, Patton got out of the car, ordered his driver to get out of the way, and then proceeded to put his arm around Lynn's shoulder and compliment him for his performance.<sup>2</sup>

Why do I share that story with you?  
Not because you knew Lynn, but perhaps you've known someone like him.

Not someone who once met General Patton.

But someone who was kind and generous.  
Hard working.

Someone who reminded you that life is to be lived with service and simplicity, with loyalty and love for friend and family, neighbors and strangers alike.

Lynn's presence in my life reminded me who I am...that I am an INDEBTED person, that so many people have given me a life that I never could have arrived at on my own.

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It's a really powerful thing, when someone reminds you of who and whose you are.

It can happen in any number of ways.  
It can even happen, not just by someone's presence in your life, but also amidst the losses we walk through in this life.

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<sup>2</sup> It was a joy to know Lynn Guilloud, and serve as his pastor at Northridge Presbyterian Church between 2009-2013.



I recall that when I was in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, I had grown very attached to the minister in my church. He'd been there a number of years, and he had a profound influence on my faith.

He taught my confirmation class.

He preached sermons that kept me awake.

He was one of the formative voices in my own calling to ministry, even though I was far too young to realize it at the time.

Then the day came when a letter arrived in the mail.

Our minister was leaving.

How could he be leaving?

I wasn't a little boy, I was 14 years old!

But it was still very hard for me to accept.

I recall our pastor talking about his departure from the pulpit one Sunday, and I left the church building to go find a place where no one would find me—because I didn't want anyone to see me cry.

At the time, you could **never** have convinced me that his departure from our church would be a good thing for me.

That was over 35 years ago.

And now I know that God was at work, even in his leaving.

Because a new minister came, and my faith was shaped in new ways by that pastor.

And I learned that by having different pastors,

good pastors,

competent pastors,

my faith did not need to rest in any particular

pastor.

My faith could rest in God.

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Can you think of anyone in your life who has taught you that?

That you belong to God,  
that you're a child of God,  
and that no matter what changes take place in your life,  
no matter what trials or tragedies you face,  
that nothing can take that identity away?

When Steve Hayner, the former President of Columbia Seminary, was dying of cancer, his good friend Craig Barnes wrote about the way that Hayner had chosen to spend his last days.

Some people thought Steve Hayner should write a book, but he said no. He didn't really get much joy out of writing.

Instead, he just wanted to be present every day—to assist his wife in remodeling the house where she would live, to carefully give away his library, and to laugh with his grandchildren.

These were the activities that would give him joy.

At one point, on the Caringbridge website that the family had created, Steve Hayner's wife wrote:

“Last Sunday night our five-year-old granddaughter Anna asked her mom and dad when she might get her regular grandpa back. This led to a conversation with Anna and seven-year-old Claire about Papa's prognosis and the new body that Jesus would give him in heaven.

Anna said, ‘I wish I knew if Jesus was going to heal him here or in heaven. But I know that Jesus keeps his promises. We can trust him.’”<sup>3</sup>

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Now...I never had the privilege of knowing Steve Hayner.  
And of course, I don’t know his granddaughter.  
But I do know this.  
Anna—at 5 years of age, she had it right.

So may I make a suggestion?

In just a few minutes, you’ll be invited to write the names of the saints of your life on one of these cards. Those people who shaped you, loved you, and reminded you who and whose you are.

You know what those names mean, right?  
Let me remind you.

They mean...

**Jesus keeps his promises.  
We can trust him.**

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> M. Craig Barnes, “Joyful to the End,” *The Christian Century*, September 10, 2014.