

When We Forget

A Sermon on First Corinthians 15: 1-11 by Rich Holmes

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Have you ever have this conversation with your spouse? I suppose if you are married for long enough at some point you will.

“Honey, do you remember what today is?”

“Is it our anniversary?”

“Of course it’s our anniversary, how could you forget?”

“I didn’t forget.”

You forgot. How could you forget our anniversary?

“No, I didn’t forget, I have always known that we were married on let’s say February 10th. I just didn’t remember that today was February 10th.”

Now, let’s say you have that conversation with your spouse. You may wonder whom I say is right. Well, today I want to start by saying that if you have ever had that conversation with your spouse, no matter who you find yourself being in that conversation, you are not completely wrong. You are at least partly right.

Now, to tell you that you are partly right is a little misleading. Part of loving someone and valuing that person that you love is remembering things about them, and about your relationship with them. And so, if you forget your anniversary or your spouse’s birthday, or you forget your children or your grandchildren’s birthday, it can be hurtful. It is disappointing. But I say it can be disappointing because in my experience it hasn’t always been. My paternal grandmother, whom my brother and I would call “Grandma Pink” never knew my name. She always called me my brother’s name, King. But that never bothered me. Maybe that never

bothered me because she didn't know King's name either, so that made it all the same. But I know it can be hurtful when someone forgets some date that is important to you, or if they should call you by the wrong name, especially if you think you are special to that person.

But on the other hand, it is partly right to say that whoever takes the role of "forgetting" your anniversary in that conversation didn't really forget. They knew what your anniversary was, they just didn't know that today was that day. And in the same way, it wasn't really the case that my grandmother forgot my name. If she had no idea what my name was, I'm sure that would have been hurtful. But that wasn't the problem. The problem was that she just could never call it to mind at the moment when she was supposed to say it.

Part of the problem, I think is that memory is not a very good word. When we talk about memory, we can really mean one of two things. Sometimes when we talk about memory we mean it dispositionally and other times we mean it occurrently. And the difference between dispositional and occurrent memory is the difference between someone saying "You have a good memory." And someone asking you "Do you remember?" When someone says "You have a good memory" they are talking dispositionally. They are saying you have a lot of stuff on the hard drive of your memory there in your brain, or that you have a lot of memories stored in the filing cabinet of your brain, as we might have said decades ago. You have a lot of storage space where most people have less storage space. But having a good memory, does not mean you are able to call it to mind right now, it does not mean you are able to call it to mind on demand. You may remember all the sights and sounds of your wedding, you may remember the tuxedos and dresses, the words that were said in your vows, the songs that were sung, you may have it in the computer hard drive of your brain. But do you remember that today is your

wedding day, or do you remember that today is someone's birthday. Can you call my name to mind when I am standing before you right now.

Well, I think this difference between dispositional and occurrent memory can help to make some sense of what Paul is saying today in his letter to the Corinthians. For Paul says to them, "Corinthians, I would remind you of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which you also stand." And as your reading you may say to yourself "What is this news that he has to remind them of?" But then he goes on to say something rather surprising, he says "For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures." But you may say to yourself if you are anything like me, "How could they forget that? How could they forget that Christ died on the cross and was raised from the dead? Surely they don't need to be reminded of that." These are Christians after all. Now, if you know anything about the church in Corinth, you know they are rather strange Christians. But they are Christians and you may say why do, they need to be reminded of anything so basic. But there is remembering, and then there is remembering. There is dispositional memory and there is occurrent memory. Because we may not forget the gospel in one way, my friends, but we forget it in another way. And if you don't think that other way matters, then tell me it doesn't matter when your spouse forgets your anniversary, tell me it doesn't matter when your mother or father forgot your birthday, tell me it didn't matter even though yes, they knew.

Now, here's something else I want to tell you all this morning. I know that a lot of you want to say to me, "Pastor Rich, you are just so learned, how is it that you come up with things to tell

us every sermon that we have never heard before?” Well, it’s amazing isn’t it? But to be quite serious with you, while I hope that every now and then I can say something new and interesting, 99 percent of what I am doing when I preach is telling you what you already know. And I am telling you what you already know because we forget. And so I remind you and I remind myself so that we may transform those dispositional memories into occurrent memories. I remind you and I remind myself, so we may bring all those things we learned in Sunday school class as a kid and in confirmation class and in Vacation Bible School in that filing cabinet of our memory into the here and now of our memory, because otherwise we forget.

And we forget not because any of us are going to go out and commit a murder or rob a bank, or sell drugs to children, or do anything so sinister, but maybe we forget when we are driving through traffic and someone rudely cuts us off and we are tempted to let them know how we feel. Or we forget when it is the holidays and we are sitting down at the dinner table with that sibling who has known us since we were born and that sibling says something to us which they know is going to get under our skin, or we forget, we forget when that neighbor who has a different skin color, or a foreign accent plays their music too loud, or let’s their leaves that they don’t rake blow into your yard and you say something hateful under your breath. It isn’t that we don’t know. It isn’t that we don’t remember, but there are times when we forget, there are times when it is not in the front of our minds, and so we need to be reminded, we need to be reminded.

Now, speaking of memory, I can’t remember if I have told you this story before or not, but it is worth repeating even if I have. You see, back in the early 70s there was an experiment that took place at Princeton Seminary back east in New Jersey. And in this experiment, a bunch of

seminary students were each told that they were to walk to a classroom on the other side of the campus and give a lecture about Luke Chapter 10: 25-37. Now, none of the students knew that they were taking part in an experiment, but those who were in on the experiment told the students one of two things. They either told them that they were running ahead of time, or that they were running late. And as they went across the campus what the students also didn't know was that there at the entrance of the building where they were to give their lecture there would be a man who was slumped in the doorway, moaning and clearly in some kind of distress. Now, fortunately, those who were told they were running ahead of time did pretty well in this little experiment. Just about all of them stopped to ask this man if he needed any help. But for those who were told they were running late, the results couldn't have been any more different. Just about all of them ignored the man, or they didn't notice him, and some of them even stepped right over him.

And then they proceeded to give a lecture on these verses in Luke Chapter Ten. What do these verses in Luke say? You know them. It says there was a man going down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, who was robbed, beaten, stripped and left half dead. By chance, a priest came by and passed by on the other side. Next, a Levite came by and passed by on the other side. And then finally a Samaritan came by, but he took pity on the man. He went to him and bandaged his wounds having poured oil and wine on him, and then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And these students proceeded to talk about what this story is all about, and how we should all be like the Good Samaritan just moments after doing the very same thing that the priest and the Levite did in this story, this story that they so claimed to love.

It isn't that they didn't know the story. It isn't that they didn't have that dispositional memory. But they didn't have an occurrent memory. They needed to be reminded. Today as we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we hear the words of Jesus as he says "This do in remembrance of me." I hope that we will think about that. I hope that we all think about that not just today, but every day.