

## “THE MEMORY OF YOU”

A Sermon for University Congregational Church

Sunday, November 3, 2019

Rev. Paul Ellis Jackson

### TRADITIONAL WORD

Hear this, all you peoples;

give ear, all inhabitants of the world,

<sup>2</sup> both low and high,

rich and poor together.

<sup>3</sup> My mouth shall speak wisdom;

the meditation of my heart shall be understanding.

<sup>4</sup> I will incline my ear to a proverb;

I will solve my riddle to the music of the harp.

<sup>5</sup> Why should I fear in times of trouble,

when the iniquity of my persecutors surrounds me,

<sup>6</sup> those who trust in their wealth

and boast of the abundance of their riches?

<sup>7</sup> Truly, no ransom avails for one's life,<sup>[a]</sup>

there is no price one can give to God for it.

<sup>8</sup> For the ransom of life is costly,

and can never suffice,

<sup>9</sup> that one should live on forever

and never see the grave.<sup>[b]</sup> --Psalm 49:1-9

### CONTEMPORARY WORD

Early in the morning when the birds sings,

Light to this world the sun brings,

When the dew drops like pearls shine,

I remember you in this heart of mine.

When the sky is covered with blanket of clouds,

The lightning strikes and the thunder goes loud,

When the whole world drenches in rain time,

I remember you in this heart of mine.

When flowers bloom in spring season,  
And smiles break out for no reason,  
For romance when the weather is fine,  
I remember you in this heart of mine.

In winter when the snow is all around,  
And fog comes out of mouths instead of sound,  
Looking at the cones of bare pine,  
I remember you in this heart of mine.

When the ground is full of dried leaves in fall,  
Of different colours from trees so tall,  
Watching those ants busy working in a line,  
I remember you in this heart of mine.

The time when love is in the air,  
And roses and chocolates are everywhere,  
The day of love, the day of valentine,  
I remember you in this heart of mine.

In the cozy full moon night,  
When cool breeze sends up chill of delight,  
Tapping on the bench by my side,  
I remember you in this heart of mine.

With bare feet I walk on the grass wet,  
And relive the day we first met,  
While listening to music with note divine,  
I remember you in this heart of mine...

Shreya Koppaka

Hear these words for the ancient book of the Jews—the Hebrew Bible. Hear what the Psalmist had to say about all of this:

Hear this, all you peoples;  
    give ear, all inhabitants of the world,  
<sup>2</sup> both low and high,  
    rich and poor together.  
<sup>3</sup> My mouth shall speak wisdom;  
    the meditation of my heart shall be understanding.

<sup>4</sup> I will incline my ear to a proverb;  
I will solve my riddle to the music of the harp.

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there is no price one can give to God for it.

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### “THE MEMORY OF YOU”

I'm always surprised when I remember my dad. He's been gone almost twenty years and yet it still feels like yesterday. I can still feel his hand in mine as I held it as I watched the EKG line slow and straighten out. His children all gathered around him as we watched his life slip away. I'm always surprised at how bright and clear that memory is. I remember the doctor standing next to me, who, rather forcefully, refused to let me wallow in a moment of “why didn't I see how sick he was?” “Why didn't I call sooner or do this or that” And the doctor, rather rudely, said: “No, you don't get to do that. Stop. This is what we have. This is what is in front of us. Your father is dying, so just stop...don't do that to yourself.”

At the time, I was stunned into compliance. I swallowed hard, nodded yes, and got busy with the tasks at hand—mainly, being there for dad's wife, Kathy, and my sisters and my baby brother. Being present and whole for everyone else who was preparing to mourn our impending loss. I had to force my selfish woes into a dark corner to deal with some other time. I'm still incredibly grateful to that doctor for her

harsh words. She made me face the reality of the present moment—she made me find the resilience within myself to be present and strong and capable. And it made a world of difference.

Yet, still, at the strangest times. I remember my father. Earl Edwin Jackson. Speaking his name calls his memory forth into this place—just as speaking the names of all of our beloved called them forth earlier.

Human memory is a tricky thing. There have been major studies done as to why certain things get placed into our short term memory, such as phone numbers, birthdays of acquaintances and remembrances of a casual encounter with a friend and why other things don't. The strangest things will float around in what we call our short-term memory, and if sufficient time passes, many of these memories will fade away. If we recall something, though, if we remember it enough, it may move into what is called our long-term memory. The primary difference between these two types of memory is fascinating. Your short-term memory is basically chemical in nature. That is, existing synapses are utilized to hold whatever that memory is. A synapse is where two or more of your nerve cells, or brain cells, connect—it's an important place in your body and brain because there's this gap, the synapse, this space between your neurons, your brain cells, and that's where these chemicals, called neurotransmitters, flow through the gap to keep the nervous message moving, or to store the short term memory. So it makes sense that someone who has a chemical imbalance in their brain, either one caused by a disease or by another debilitating chemical, say an anesthetic or even alcohol, then the chemicals that

normally flow between these gaps get messed up and your synapses don't function as they should. This is why certain memories might not even make it into your short term memory! There's a very good reason many people don't remember what happened around their surgeries—that's because the chemicals used to sedate and paralyze you also mess with the chemicals that flow through your synapses and so your memory doesn't function correctly. Same as with substance abuse. If illicit chemicals are messing with someone's synapses enough, they are not going to remember much of what happens. In some cases this is a blessing.

Now your long-term memory is actually structural. Where in short-term memory you had chemicals sustaining the image or event, in long-term memory your brain actually creates whole new synapses—so that it's actually part of your brain structure. It's much more difficult to change long-term memories because they are physically part of your brain. Short-term memory, by its very nature, is malleable--changeable. This is why it's important to get things right, if you can, about an event, because once they move into long term memory, they become more permanent—harder to change. And this is why it's sometimes easy to not trust our short-term memory, because it can be changed easier.

One little thing we know that helps with our memories though is writing things down. When you write something down, the next time you read it, your brain is triggered and the synapses all sort of remember what you are reading and so if you do that enough as well, it will eventually get moved into long-term memory. This is why I

have taken to writing much more down than I ever did before! I trust my notes better than my brain sometimes. We write stuff down.

The gospel narratives in the Christian Testament, what is more commonly referred to as the New Testament, are attempts by the earliest followers of Jesus of Nazareth to remember him. They wrote it down. They wrote lots of stuff down—but the most famous documents that have survived two millennia to help show us the way are the Gospels of Mark, Luke, and Matthew. The fourth Gospel, the Gospel of John, is in a class all of its own, so I give it that distinction. There are other, non-canonical gospels, that is, gospels of the same time period that did not make it into the official canon, the Holy Bible. I'll remind you that the canon, the documents that were to make up the Bible, we're probably a list of favorites of one man—Bishop Athanasius. In 367, one man, one very powerful man, wrote an Easter letter to the churches he was responsible for and he laid-out those books that were the official books for teaching the faith. I mention this because there are many other books about the early Christian centuries, the first 300 or so years after Jesus' life that remembered the events and his teachings in very different ways. A different memory of Jesus. What the Bishop was more interested in was control. What documents would provide a memory of the Christ that the religious authorities could use to exert influence in the political realm and use to keep the population placid and easy to manipulate. Cynical, you might say. Well, seminary does that to you! You learn some important truths that were kept from you for years. I share some of this with you because I believe this congregation can handle the truth. But you might begin to see how the memory of Jesus was influenced by the writings that were preserved and

championed, while the other writings, those documents that may have captured a very different memory of Jesus, they did not survive or are not nearly as popular as the ones in the Bible. So, you might say that the entire bible is an attempt at helping with a specific memory of Jesus and the early church. It is to help us remember the stories that make us moral, in some cases, make us more courageous, in other cases, and provide us with comfort and wisdom. It's a memory book of our faith. I would say that it should be a living memory book, but that's a topic for a different time. But I think I've hinted at some of the problems—er, opportunities, that honest approaches to biblical scholarship provide us with.

So, if the bible is one way in which we have to remember Jesus and remember the church, then how will this congregation be remembered? I know some will remember us for our daring progressive ways—for the unconventional clergy that you all see fit to support. Two humans who don't meet the traditional mold of minister. Will this congregation be remembered for its impressive and generous music program? Or for its many outreach projects that impact and improve the lives of countless of our neighbors whether through the hygiene party, or meals for the homeless, or partnership trips to Nicaragua. I'm certain this small community of humans will be remembered for all of these things and more.

And then, too, what about the ways in which you will be remembered? Will you be remembered as a Scrooge? A tight-fisted old miser who held onto his last penny? Or will you be remembered as the post-transformational Scrooge—the one who bought Bob Cratchit's family the biggest turkey in the corner store?

Will you be remembered as withholding of affection? For whatever reason? Or will you be remembered as being generous with your love? Will you be remembered as one who loved abundantly and without reserve? The nice thing about still being alive is that we have some time to possibly affect how we will be remembered.

We are human and we are both gifted and cursed with memory. We are doomed to remember the terrible betrayals, the broken heart, and the deeply wounding words. We are doomed to remember the loss—the aching, empty place where our love once resided—and in fact still resides. We are cursed with the memories of our own short-comings. Our failures. The word that escaped our mouth at that most inopportune time. The glare that cast a shadow on a loved one's misplaced optimism. The turning away when someone who loved us needed our presence. We are cursed to remember that.

Some of us turn to artificial means to deal with this curse of being human. Some of us drink to excess or dull the ache with other chemicals or stimulants or shopping or non-relational sex. Transactional sex. We do whatever we can with whatever is available to dull the edges of our memory. And if we're lucky, we might get a few hours or days of blessed relief from the memory.

But then, as surely as the Kansas winter arrives when we least expect it, something, some stupid, little, inconsequential thing will remind us of the event. Of the loss. Of the betrayal. And we find our stomachs shrinking into a small, black pit. And we find our minds grasping for anything that might keep us from falling into that darkness that consumes us when we remember.



Some might want you to cheer up—to wrap all of that pain and memory in a little box and stuff it into a corner of your soul. Something to be kept there—never mentioned, rarely noticed and certainly never talked about or explained. Some might tell you to stop being so sad. To stop being so depressed. But I say—embrace your sadness and embrace the darkness. There is nothing to be gained by pretending it doesn't exist. That the memory is somehow false. That you shouldn't recall these things. Embrace it all. All of your foibles and follies and stupid, stupid mistakes. Embrace the memory of your loved one who died twenty years ago and it feels as fresh as if he died earlier this morning. Embrace your sadness and your failure and shortcomings as a human being. Hold them all tightly in your arms. And then look around and see that every other single human being on the planet is hugging their failures and their loss and their pain JUST AS TIGHTLY. Because we are all human. And we all feel this way. Embrace it all, hold it tightly, look about you at everyone else and we can then all just let it all go...release it into the ether....give it to the great Kansas South winds. Let it blow out of our arms and into the arms of God. It's not gone—it's never gone—but let it mingle with the pain of everyone else on the planet. Let your failure mix with the great failures of every other human being—let your unknowable sadness shift and flurry on the wind with all of the other unknowable sadness that everyone else has. I hate to break this to you...but you're not that special. You are actually just a plain old, ordinary, standard-issue human being. Stop holding yourself to some perfect ideal that humans should never try to attain. Why don't you just for once try to be a decent human? Not a perfect one. That way, when you face insurmountable loss, you can take a deep breath, remind

yourself that you are a standard-issue human being, and then do your very best to face the loss. You don't have to be perfect. You can be sad. You can mourn.

As we remember all of those who went before us today, the saints—the sinners—the lost—the found—the great—the proud—the talented—the not-so-talented—the lovely—the brilliant—the deeply, deeply loved friends and fathers and mothers and husbands and wives and children and lovers and everyone who has gone before us into God's loving embrace...as we remember them all, let's remember and celebrate THEIR humanity. For all of their greatness that our minds have created about them—or for all of the anger and hurt and betrayal that we may have heaped upon them, possibly undeservedly so, let's remember that they, too, were just a standard-issue human being. We've got to stop pretending we are something other than what we are—created humans doing our very best to get by.

Last night at dinner, I was talking about this sermon with Duane and he reminded me of a very lovely quote about remembrance—how and when we remember our loved ones and friends. The quote is attributed to Banksy, the renegade anonymous British street artist, but it probably has been around longer than that.

"They say you die twice. Once when you stop breathing and the second, a bit later on, when somebody mentions your name for the last time." That is, we live on in the memories of those who loved us and once they forget us, we are truly gone. Duane also said something else that has resonated with me. He said that he understands this quote as telling us TO remember people. Sometimes we may feel like it's uncomfortable to bring up one who has died—the pain is too fresh—or we just think

people should get on with their lives. But for Duane, the very act of remembering, even if painful, keeps that person alive—just a bit longer. What a beautiful way to keep our loved ones with us—saying their name, recalling their memory and living in that beautiful, and yes sometimes painful, moment.

I pray that each of us, in each encounter in the coming days, do everything within our power to make that moment in time—that conversation—that hug—that dinner—that autumn morning coffee—I pray that we each make that encounter a sacred and holy thing—because it may move into our memory as a monument to the past. God is in the space between you and the other. God is in the face of that person you are talking to. May you treat everyone you encounter as you might treat the Divine One. For indeed, they are the same. And may we create the memory of that encounter in a way in which we want to remember it. As a good and sacred moment. The memory of you.

Amen

Please stand as you are able and sing our benediction song.

RESOURCES:

Holy Bible, NRSV