

"The People Who Can't Forget"

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Text: Deuteronomy 8:6-17

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Her name is Jill Price. She is the first person to have been diagnosed with a condition known as hyperthymestic syndrome. Hyper – meaning more than normal – thymesises – remembering. In other words, Price has an amazing memory. Since the age of 14 she has had total recall. Price was featured on ABC's 20/20 a few weeks ago and she has written a book about her experience entitled, "The Woman Who Can't Forget." Here's an excerpt:

I have . . . continuous, automatic autobiographical recall of every day of my life from when I was age fourteen on. . . . Give me a date from [1980] forward and I can instantly tell you what day of the week it was, what I did on that day, and any major event that took place or even minor events as long as I heard about them on that day.

My memories are like scenes from home movies of every day of my life, constantly playing in my head, flashing forward and backward through the years relentlessly, taking me to any given moment, entirely of their own volition. Imagine if someone had made videos of you from the time you were a child, following you around all day, day by day, and then combined them all onto one DVD, and you sat in a room and watched that DVD on a machine set to shuffle randomly through all the tracks. . . . That's how I experience my memories. I never know what I might remember next, and my recall is so vivid and true to life that it's as though I'm actually reliving the days, for good and for bad.

I can recall memories at will when I'm asked to, but on a regular basis my remembering is automatic. I don't make any effort to call memories up; they just fill my mind. In fact, they're not under my conscious control, and much as I'd like to, I can't stop them.

Can you imagine what that would be like? How enjoyable that could be? Just think – the ability, the opportunity to be able to vividly recall – to almost relive particular moments of your life. Moments that passed far too quickly – planned moments – wouldn't it be a real kick to go back and relive your wedding ceremony, your baptism, the birth of one of your children or grandchildren? And not just planned moments – but spontaneous occasions – serendipitous moments – your first kiss, the last time you were with a loved one before they passed away. Or what about being able to be on the athletic field – to relive that ballgame or that track meet, to experience once again that drama production or your first prom or a particular moment when you were overwhelmed with the experience of God's presence.

The process of memory or remembering has always fascinated me. Memory is vital to life. Prisoners of war and hostages have survived and kept their sanity through memory – recalling the names of school teachers, the names of classmates, street numbers, a thousand insignificant things. They kept themselves alive by reaching into the chest of memory, holding on to yesterday, hoping somehow to guarantee a tomorrow.

Remembering is a large part of this holiday weekend. The first Memorial Day – known then as Decoration Day – was observed 140 years ago, May 30, 1868, to honor and remember those killed during the Civil War. After World War I, the holiday was expanded to include those in any war. In 2000 the "National Moment of Remembrance" Act was passed which calls upon everyone on Memorial Day at 3:00 p.m. local time to "voluntarily and informally observe a moment of remembrance and respect."

Memory is vital to life – but memory can also be a trap – a place to hide, where we refuse to face reality of today, longing for the way it used to be, even though it never was. Memory can be used for demonic purposes – when we absolutely refuse to forget certain things. It can be a cave for nursing hatred and grudges.

To have a condition like hyperthymestic syndrome as Jill Price does would, I think, be a real gift – a genuine blessing. But as she herself admits in her book, it has its downside. Her brother, Mike, is quoted as saying: "There were things I would think to myself, why doesn't Jill just get over that? I've forgotten it already. But obviously, she hasn't." Jill writes: "I still feel bad about stuff that happened 30 years ago. And I really live it and feel it."

What would that be like? Having to vividly relive losses, tragedies, hurts, disappointments? Would that pain outweigh the pleasure of having total recall? Jill Price's experience serves as a reminder that our lives and happiness may be shaped not only by what we remember, but by what we choose to forget.

Remembering and forgetting is what our scripture passages are all about. The reading from Deuteronomy describes Moses' address to Israel as they're encamped in the plains of Moab following the wilderness experience – poised to enter the promised land of Canaan. Moses warns them that success in Canaan will tempt Israel to forget the forty years of wilderness – a wilderness that was characterized by complete and absolute dependence upon God. He admonishes the people of Israel not to forget God.

Take heed, for when you have eaten and are full and have built houses and live in them, and when herds and flocks and silver and gold and all that you have is multiplied and your heart is lifted up, do not forget the Lord, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage, who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no waster, who brought you water out of the flinty rock, who fed you in the wilderness with manna which your father did not know. Beware, lest you say in your heart, "My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth."

Moses saw those forty years as a testing/probation period, to see if Israel was worthy of God's favor. Settlement into Canaan will continue that probation, but it will be characterized not by deprivation, but by abundance. He warns that the early bitterness of the wilderness experience may slip into self-righteousness and overconfidence. Moses' words, then, are a call to refresh the historical memory of Israel. The greatest danger to the people is forgetfulness. Israel might forget that it is God who gives/saves.

In our other scripture reading, Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem, and an encounter with ten lepers leads to their healing. One of them turned back and praised God. Not only did the healed leper remember to say thank you, he remembered to whom he was thankful.

As the people of God, as the community of faith, as the body of Christ here on earth, there are some things we'd like to forget – mistakes, our faithlessness, hurtful conflicts, indifference, ineffectiveness. But there are many things which we must never forget. We must remember that we're here today – we're survivors – there may have been times when we didn't think we'd make it and we nearly didn't. Times, perhaps, when we almost hoped we wouldn't. Times when we were ready to give the whole thing up. After all, who among us haven't seen enough sorrow and pain to turn hearts to stone? We must remember those times when we might have given up, gone under, but we didn't. We haven't given up.

We're all survivors and we're all here. What does that tell us, our surviving? It tells us that as weak as we are, a strength beyond our strength has pulled us through at least this far, at least to this day. Foolish as we are, a wisdom beyond our wisdom has flickered up just often enough to light us, if not to the right path in the forest, at least to a path that leads forward, that is bearable. Faint of heart as we are, a love beyond our power to love has kept our hearts alive. When we intentionally remember, we can see that though most of the time we failed to see it, we were never really alone. We couldn't have made it on our own – who or what do we have to thank for our survival? Our lucky stars?

It is God who has been with us through all our days and years whether we knew it or not. God sings with us in our best moments and in our worst moments, to heal us with divine wonders, to wound us healingly with divine judgment, to bless us in hidden ways. All of us can speak for ourselves – we can remember for ourselves, remember our own lives. Someone died whom we loved and needed and from somewhere something came to fill our emptiness and mend us when we were broken. Was it only time that mended, only the return to the busyness of life that filled our emptiness? Maybe we were angry with someone – so angry that we said something we could have bitten our tongue off afterward – or someone said something to us in anger. But out of somewhere – forgiveness came – a bridge was rebuilt. Or maybe we found ourselves finally climbing out of the dark hole of depression or anxiety or despair. Is the human heart the only source of its own healing? Is it only our minds that tell us that when we choose to thrash around in quicksand made of bitterness and estrangement, we will end up sinking to our own deaths? Is it only the fickle finger of fate that we have to thank?

Friends, I believe our faith leads us to respond in the negative to those questions – not human mind, or the human spirit or coincidence that deserves the credit. We know deep down I think that it is God who has empowered us to not just survive but thrive as the people we were created to be. Never has there been a time in the past when God wasn't there with us, as the strength beyond our strength, the wisdom beyond our wisdom, as the stuff in our hearts that keep those hurts from withering or growing cold. To remember at all is to see that we are here today by grace – God's abundant grace – and that we have survived and thrived as a gift – a gift from God.

According to the secular calendar – tomorrow is the day for remembering. I suggest that for the community of faith, today is our day for remembering. I call us to remember, as Frederick Buechner writes:

. . . remember what [God] has done in the lives of each of us, and beyond that remember what [God] has done in the life of the world; remember above all what [God] has done in Christ [call us to:] remember those moments in our own lives when with only the dullest understanding but with the sharpest longing we have glimpsed that Christ's kind of life is the only life that matters and that all other kinds of life are riddled with death; [call us to:] remember those moments in our lives when Christ came to us in countless disguises through people who one way or another strengthened us, comforted us, healed us, judged us, by the power of Christ alive within them. All that is the past. All that is what there is to remember. And *because* that is the past, *because* we remember, we have this high and holy hope: that what [God] has done, [God] will continue to do, that what [God] has begun in us and our world, [God] will in unimaginable ways bring to fullness and fruition.

Let us pray: O God, it's not really necessary for us to remember every detail of the picture of our days. We'll settle for living those days and being able to see and celebrate your initials in the lower right hand corner.

A portion of this sermon was adapted from a sermon by Frederick Buechner.