

Avoiding an Insidious Form of Amnesia

Deuteronomy 8:7-18

Communion – January 6, 2008

Moses is worried here, about memory loss! It's not the kind of memory loss, though, in which you and I block on names that normally we know as well as our own, or where we walk purposefully into the next room but then can't remember what it was we went in there to get, or when a meeting we were supposed to have attended tonight, completely slips the mind.

It can be disconcerting and annoying. This, though, is a much more serious form of amnesia. It's one, moreover, over which a person really does have control. It is to forget, simply because forgetting is more comfortable and less demanding than remembering. That's the amnesia against which he warns them as they stand on the threshold of an exciting new era, a new set of opportunities and surroundings. "As you set forth in this new time, he says in effect, don't you dare forget all that God has taught you in these four decades of living that have led up to this good time and place. For if you do forget, the time ahead will be a cursed one rather than one of blessing."

It was an important and powerful speech, one which is worth hearing again whenever we human beings stand in the beginning of a new year, new stages of life, new opportunities. For much of the time, when things turn sour, it isn't because we never knew better. Rather, it's this selective amnesia against which Moses warned.

We do know something about it, don't we?

Arriving, as sometimes happens for us, at a really comfortable, agreeable, rewarding period in life, there can be a temptation, subtly to rewrite the past in a more satisfying way, thereby losing track of what the truth really was, regarding of how we've gotten to where we are. When all is well now, and one is brimming with brand new confidence, forgotten can be the wilderness: those not-so-admirable times of self-doubt, of self-pity, of pessimism, or maybe despair that were an embarrassing, but nevertheless important part of our development and survival. At most, under "selective amnesia" the embarrassing times may now be remembered as only having been minor, barely noticeable morale glitches which we heroically breezed through by sheer strength of character.

Another victim of this kind of selective amnesia is often the memory of all of those who supported, forgave, were forbearing, and gave us the benefit of the doubt. To truly remember how crucial those persons were to us, is hard on the ego.

Probably the most egregious, flagrant application of amnesia, though, is that by which, when now surrounded with abundant resources and opportunities, one forgets that virtually all of it has directly to do with the accident of birth that landed you and me here rather than in rural Yugoslavia, and/or the grace of good heredity, and/or that of reasonably adequate health. It is the outrageous forgetting of the whole complex fabric of God's grace that has been quietly at work in and around us. That kind of amnesia often accounts for some of the most obnoxious people you know, hence Moses' stern warning: "If you start thinking to yourselves, I did all this. And all by myself. I'm rich. It's all mine!" -- well, think again.

But there's a lot of other truth that, under certain circumstances, also gets forgotten. One, ironically, is a truth to which, back along the way, we were exposed repeatedly, but often seems completely forgotten when most needed. It is that God REALLY HAS equipped us to handle what is out there, on up ahead in life's journey. Forgotten is what we discovered of how, at our best, we repeatedly have turned out to be more ingenious than we thought, that we have wisdom with which we are barely in touch, that we have untapped intuition and insight, and that we all have adaptive capacities that, until they're needed, we wouldn't believe are there.

I have a friend who had a little brush with cancer – bladder cancer. Having decades of being around people who had just been told that they had cancer, had the big "C," I long wondered what my own reaction would be if and when I were told that I had a malignancy. Anyway, this friend heard the words: "Transitional cell carcinoma." He said he subsequently or later learned that it was very manageable cancer, but he didn't know that at first.

What surprised him, as he related it to me, was that it was a non-event for him. His life DID NOT PASS before his eyes. He didn't feel depressed or frightened. Nothing in the way of spiritual heroics came to his mind. He said he didn't know what had "kicked in," but it was okay. He described it as a "real nuisance." Reflecting upon his reaction, all I could think was what an awesome thing our minds are. They have strengths, strategies, mechanisms and stabilities that, given half a chance, are quite capable of doing what needs to be done.

I've seen this same thing, though, and so have you, in persons going through profound grief's that, before the fact, they would have told you that they'd never be able to handle. Not that it wasn't difficult and stressful, but amazingly, just enough comfort, just enough hope, just enough equilibrium, just enough light was there at the point when needed, to make possible another step in the grieving process. I'd be willing to bet that almost all of us have had some variant of this experience, where, even though we'd "been there" before, we were

quite surprised that the necessary courage was there, the right words came, the ability to improvise emerged. It's crazy to forget that truth about ourselves, but people do. Then, having forgotten, they'll give in to panic or petulance, and petulance and self-pity are always a monkey wrench thrown into our own effectiveness.

Another failure to remember that wastes an enormous amount of our energy and ingenuity, is forgetting that despite all of our attempts, we have never been able to pin down the future before the future gets here. We, in our own pasts, have experienced all those twists of fate, the unthinkable coincidences, the absolute certainties that evaporate, the good fortune and tragedy that both seem to come out of nowhere, the elaborate protections and preparations that turn out comical, but STILL we have trouble remembering what that teaches: how utterly open, dynamic, free, unscripted and out of our reach is the future. Perhaps we forget and ignore what we've learned about managing the future because we don't want to go there unprotected and without being able to have control over it. So instead, we keep right on acting as if just a little more money acquired, just a little more insurance taken out, just a little better security system, trying one more health gimmick, paying more careful attention to our horoscopes, or searching the scriptures for hidden truths about what God's final plans are, will give us, this time what we need to bring the future under control.

So having forgotten that it never works – not for us or anyone else, yet again some of us will ravel out our energy and ingenuity projecting ourselves into a time that is out of our reach. It's a neurotic compulsion that takes us out of the present moment – which is the only time that any of us can live right now.

To mention only one more truth that, in our better moments, we have understood very well, but that falls victim to this strange kind of amnesia, it's the simple Christian truth that each one of us is a unique son or daughter of God, placed here to be THAT in ways that only each one of us can. The problem is that when, for whatever reason, we forget that, we fall into making stupid comparisons.

Since all such comparisons between the worth and meaning of two human beings are useless and misleading, we then end up losing track of what are our own particular gifts. Human beings, when one stops to think about it, are the only creatures on the planet who have difficulty remembering who we are. To the best of our knowledge, dogs don't fall to self-despising, jealousy or depression because they can't climb like a squirrel or a cat. Flowers don't wring their leaves with despair over not being as productive as are the vegetable producing plants. Only human beings seem to forget the internal authority that God has given

to each of us as God's sons or daughters. And having forgotten that, will become intimidated and disoriented by expectations, appraisals and verdicts of other people.

The late Norman Cousins wrote of meeting a woman several years after she was predicted to have died of cancer. She told Cousins how, after all of the tests, the physician to whom she had gone for a second opinion told her, "I'm sorry, but yes, you have an uncontrollable cancer. You have, at most, six months to live." She said that she told him, "You go to hell!" and walked out of his office. Explaining it to Cousins, she said, "I accepted the diagnosis. I did not accept the verdict." Obviously she didn't. It was years later and she was still very much alive.

That was an important distinction -- one not to be forgotten? Stated simply, it is that no one other than each one of us and God gets to pronounce verdicts on the value of what we bring to life, on how it should be offered, and, as in the case of this woman, what are the limits, the miracles and the hopes that can and should unfold. Don't forget that. It's basic.

In fact. Be alert to this whole tendency of "lazy remembering" and "comfortable forgetting" against which Moses warned. As he pointed out, it often happens most easily following a string of smoothly running days and/or during the intoxications of success. Like those ancient Hebrews on the edge of their promised land, or maybe one of us at one of the milestones of our lives, it is when, carefully forgetting the truth, the tough changes, the mistakes of the past, it now seems like a bit of complacency is okay, some hard-earned self-satisfaction is appropriate and that a time of coasting is in order.

NO! What that is, is a very dangerous point -- one where a lot of people spiritually disintegrate. And it is this "selective amnesia" that does it to them.