

He 13:1-8
 26 June 2011
 (revised from a previous sermon)

“Remember”

Memory is a funny thing. No one really knows how it works. For centuries, philosophers and physicians, artists and scientists, have investigated and debated as to how it is that we're able to remember. Does the mind retrieve memories like files in a cabinet or on a computer disk? Does the mind re-create memories; do we mentally relive the experience? Or is something completely different involved?

This business of memory has become more personal for me in recent years. No doubt **some of you** have stories to tell about memory, or the loss thereof: that is, if you can remember them! In my case, the story is about an **expected** loss of memory.

During my treatment for the brain tumor that was discovered in November 1995, my doctors warned me about possible loss of short term memory. Having one's head cut open twice, and having one's brain zapped with radiation, can't help but produce **some** detrimental effect! Fortunately, my problems have been minor: like trying to identify certain actors.

Of course, memory is much more important to us than remembering what a certain celebrity looks like. In a very real sense, memory helps to define us. Any of us who've known someone with amnesia, perhaps an Alzheimer's patient, understands what a tragedy the loss of memory is. So much of such a person is gone; so much of that person has died.

It really isn't much of an exaggeration to link memory with life. Memory certainly has a crucial role in the life of faith. For example, next week we will celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. We “do this,” as Jesus said, “in remembrance of [him].” Still, there's more involved here than simply having a mental recollection of Jesus—but I'll mention more about that later. (If I don't forget!)

In the epistle reading, the author of Hebrews is **insistent** on having the people remember certain things. Chapter 13 begins with a stress on the importance of continuing to love one another and showing hospitality to strangers. As a matter of fact, our writer indicates that by receiving outsiders in a Christlike way, you may even be entertaining angels in human form. (That's something for **all** of us to consider the next time we get an unwanted knock at the door!)

Having established that love should guide our relationships, our author starts giving examples—examples that portray a love which you probably won't find on a greeting card!

Verse 3 contains the first of two commands to “remember.” “Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.” Love can make some pretty serious demands!

We're not sure who wrote the epistle to the Hebrews, and we're also not sure who the audience is. The people who later gave the letter its name (“to the Hebrews”) obviously felt that it was addressed to Jewish Christians. But it's possible, even probable, that the letter was **also** directed to Gentiles.

One thing it seems safe to say: the letter is addressed to a church that has undergone varying degrees of persecution. That makes it all the more important that they love one another, that they really care what happens to each other.

By the way, here's a case in which memory and life **really do** go together. That's especially fitting today, which is the International Day in Support of Victims of Torture, or for short, the International Day against Torture. Remember those who are in prison; remember those who are being tortured. Remember—don't forget—lives are at stake.

In recent years, **our own** relationship with torture has been what we might call "conflicted." Of course, that's something that plenty of us would rather **not** remember!

The next three verses give more examples of what love looks like. Marriage is to be "held in honor by all," and "the love of money" is to be avoided (vv. 4-5). The phrase "the love of money" is a single Greek word (*αφιλαργυρος*, *aphilarguros*) which literally means "not a lover of silver," or "not mercenary."

It's the word used in that famous verse in 1 Timothy, reminding us, in King James language, "For the love of money is the root of all evil" (6:10).¹ So the moral of the story is: don't be a heartless mercenary! Don't focus on wealth while your brothers and sisters are in danger.

Verse 7 contains the second of the two commands to "remember." "Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith." As I said before, we're not sure who this letter was sent to, so we can't say exactly what the author means by imitating the faith of their leaders.

But if, as seems likely, that this is a persecuted church, then their leaders paid a high price for their faith. It seems that to "consider the outcome of their way of life" means to remember that at least **some** of them were martyrs. Last month, when I preached about Stephen, I said that the same Greek word means "witness" and "martyr." This time, it's "martyr" the way we usually think of it!

This is a sobering bit of advice, and we may want to dismiss this as just an historical relic. But it has current day meaning. We're told, "Leaders of the persecuted Church may seem very different from church leaders in the West, but each have many things they can learn from each other. Leaders in countries like Sudan, China, and Vietnam lead their flocks at the risk of their safety, their family's security, or their very lives. Their constituents must be ready to step forward in leadership should their pastor be arrested, harmed, or simply 'disappear.'"²

Earlier I promised to say more about the role of memory in celebrating the Lord's Supper. I'll do that by mentioning one of the twentieth century's most famous leaders of the persecuted church, the Archbishop of El Salvador, Oscar Romero. Romero was assassinated on March 24, 1980 in the very act of celebrating the Eucharist. While calling the people to remember the body and blood of Christ given for them, Romero himself became a martyr.

My sermon is partly inspired by the title of an article about Oscar Romero: "Dying for the Eucharist or Being Killed by It?" Dying for the Eucharist. There are Christians in the world for whom what we do has an altogether different level of importance.

¹ Harold Attridge, *Hebrews* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 388.

² www.persecutedchurch.org/know/theology/leaders.htm

Jesus instructs his disciples to observe holy communion “in remembrance of me” (Lk 22:19). The word for “remembrance” is αναμνησις (*anamnēsis*). As I’ve already indicated, this is more than what we today usually mean by remembering. It’s “not a mental exercise but the making present of a past event.” Maybe the idea of memory as re-creating or reliving the experience has something to say here.

“In the ancient church, the word *anamnesis* had the effect not so much of a memorial, as one would call to mind the dead, but rather of a performance,” of something happening right then and there.³

Jesus invites us to the table, not to reminisce about some long ago event, but to quite literally “re-member” him. We’re invited, and challenged, to be members of the body of Christ here and now. And because, as verse 8 puts it, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever,” our invitation to the table involves us not only in the past and present, but points us to the future, to the full coming of the kingdom of God.

In the collection of his writings entitled *The Violence of Love*, we hear these words of Oscar Romero: “The eucharist makes us look back to Calvary twenty centuries ago...[but] it also looks ahead to the future, to the...horizon that presents itself as a demanding ideal to all political systems, to all social struggles, to all those concerned for the earth. The church does not ignore the earth, but in the eucharist it says to all who work on earth: look beyond....That is why I say: all the blood, all the dead, all the mysteries of iniquity and sin, all the tortures, all those dungeons of our security forces, where unfortunately many persons slowly die, do not mean they are lost forever.”⁴

All this talk of torture and dungeons may have you wondering how we here today fit into the picture. We don’t exactly fit the profile of a persecuted church. But that doesn’t mean that there isn’t suffering among us. Sometimes suffering is self-imposed, by the bad choices we make. But by and large, suffering is a part of life. It’s a part of life in a world in which there’s little, if any, remembrance of Jesus.

As we accept the invitation of Jesus, we have the honor of bringing that remembrance, that *anamnesis*, into every shadow, every hidden place in our world: as the scripture says, to love one another, to show hospitality to the stranger, to honor marriage, to not be mercenary in our dealings with money.

I want to conclude with a reflection by a man who’s a prime example of what it means to remember Jesus. He was abducted in the 1980s by terrorists in Lebanon and held for sixteen months, twelve of them in solitary confinement. His name is Benjamin Weir; he and his wife Carol were serving as Presbyterian missionaries at the time. I’ve included his meditation in the worship bulletin:⁵

“Sunday morning in captivity I awoke.

In my mind’s eye I could see Christians all waking and proceeding to places of worship.

There they gathered at the Lord’s Table.

³ William T. Cavanaugh, “Dying for the Eucharist or Being Killed by It?” *Theology Today* 58:2 (July 2001): 182.

⁴ Cavanaugh, 183-184.

⁵ www.nccusa.org/assembly/persa.htm

My mind moved westward with the sun.
I envisioned people of various cultural backgrounds gathering.
I was part of this far-flung family, the very body of Christ.
I unwrapped my piece of bread held back from my previous meager meal
and began the Presbyterian order of worship.
When it came to sharing the cup I had no visible wine,
but this didn't seem to matter.
I knew that others were taking the cup for me elsewhere at this universal table.
As others prayed for me, so I prayed for them."