

1 November 2015

The Sin of Forgetfulness
Ezekiel 16:43, 59-63

Ezekiel 16:43, 59-63

Because you have not remembered the days of your youth, but have enraged me with all these things; therefore, I have returned your deeds upon your head, says the Lord GOD.

Yes, thus says the Lord GOD: I will deal with you as you have done, you who have despised the oath, breaking the covenant; yet I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish with you an everlasting covenant. Then you will remember your ways, and be ashamed when I take your sisters, both your elder and your younger, and give them to you as daughters, but not on account of my covenant with you. I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall know that I am the LORD, in order that you may remember and be confounded, and never open your mouth again because of your shame, when I forgive you all that you have done, says the Lord GOD.

* * *

As many of you know, I was away last Sunday. I was on the road, coming back from a conference in Colorado. This conference, sponsored by a Christian publishing company, was called, “The Future of Church,” and if you’ve been listening to me preach or reading my newsletter articles at all over the past ten years, you know that this is a topic of consuming interest to me. I believe that we are in a time of huge social and demographic change, which *will* affect the church. Nobody knows how, but I suspect it will be dramatic. So of course I would go to a conference called “The Future of the Church.” Well, based on my experience there, it turns out that the church of the future is smug and pretentious and buys its materials from a Christian publishing company in Colorado.

No, it wasn’t all that bad. I did learn some fascinating things there, and once I’ve pondered them for a while, you will certainly hear about them from this pulpit. But there was definitely a self-satisfied air hovering over the conference, an attitude of nobody-else-is-as-clever-and-farsighted-as-we-are. Speaker after speaker reeled off grim statistics about the numerical decline of the church, suggesting that the traditional church was on its last legs and could only be saved by adopting whatever new approach that speaker was presenting. And again, to be fair, many of those ideas were good ideas – ideas for taking the church outside the brick walls of the building, which I do believe is necessary. But as good as those ideas were, they were still presented as *the* way to save the old, decrepit, dying church, and it bothered me more and more as the week went on. One man tearfully begged us to stop “tweaking” the old church and instead dissolve into small house churches like they had in the New Testament. Like the ones he works with. And I wondered, does a house church run a community Needs Closet? A Memory Café? It didn’t matter, though. The bias for much of the conference was that whatever was old was bad and had to be replaced at once with something shiny.

Let us not commit the sin of forgetfulness. In Ezekiel 16, the prophet describes God's relationship with Judah in an extended allegory. In his (rather graphic) story, Israel was a child abandoned beside the road that God found and took in. He cleaned her up, raised her, taught her right from wrong. But when Israel grew up, Ezekiel says, she forgot her protector and turned to other gods. Verse 22: "In all your abominations . . . you did not remember the days of your youth." The sin of forgetfulness. And there is a consequence for forgetting what God has done for you. Verse 43: "Because you have not remembered the days of your youth, but have enraged me with all these things; therefore, I have returned your deeds upon your head, says the Lord God."

You see, when we put aside the past, we also put aside the memory of God's love that has led us to this point. Yes, we need to read the signs of the times to the best of our ability. Yes, we need to adapt to our context when that context changes. But we must never forget that we are here today because God, our help in ages past, has brought us here.

Today is a day for remembering. As we celebrate our new ministries – like the Downtown Memory Café, started last year, and the Visitation Team initiative that we started this year – we know that the only reason we were able to begin those new things is because of those who went before us. This year, for instance, we remember Jane Sauer, who taught children in this church, who served on every committee the church had to offer, who through the hundreds of cards she sent out every month became a one-woman pastoral care team, and whose memorial fund is still buying Bibles to give to our second graders every year. Let us not commit the sin of forgetfulness. This year we remember Ruth Church, who – over her hundred-plus years of life – inspired at least three generations with her goodness and love. Let us not commit the sin of forgetfulness. We remember Bea Musolf and Lura Bangle and Lorraine Mathwick. And beyond these names from our own church family, there are the parents, grandparents, children, siblings, and other loved ones who have contributed to our lives and whom we also remember today. Let us not commit the sin of forgetfulness.

Today, All Saints Day, we remember that God has always been with us – both through the work of this church and through the lives of those who ministered here. Yes, an unknown world awaits us, and yes, the times, they are a-changing. We must not hunker down behind our walls and screw our eyes shut and hide from the future. But if there is anything more dangerous than refusing to look toward the future, it is refusing to acknowledge the past.

And so we read these names today, remembering who they were to us, remembering how God worked through them to make us who we are. As I read these names, I invite family members to come forward and light a candle as a visible remembrance, and I invite all whose lives have been touched by that person to stand in testimony to that life. Let us not commit the sin of forgetfulness.

(A pause here, while we read the names of our loved ones who died this past year.)

One three-hour session I went to at the conference was called "The Future of Worship." The first hour and a half was spent in an extended worship experience, designed to introduce us to creative new ways to worship – things that would appeal to all the senses and to worshipers of

all sorts. Without describing the whole 90 minutes, let me give you one quick example. Seated at tables, we were given three little condiment cups with different substances in them and asked to taste each of them, then choose one. Having chosen we were told to meditate prayerfully on how that taste reminded us of Jesus. My first taste was chili sauce – I think Sriracha Sauce, if you know it. That was a problem, actually, because once you've tasted really hot sauce, that's pretty much all you taste for a while. No idea what the second substance was. The third might have been caramel ice cream topping. So in the end, here's what I meditated on. Don't mix chili sauce and caramel topping. If you're wondering, it does not make you think of Jesus.

And why would we do all this anyway? We already have a way to taste and see that the Lord is good. We already have a way to remember Jesus with our senses of taste and smell. We in the Church have been doing it for two thousand years, ever since Jesus Christ himself began the practice as a time of remembrance. While we gather at this table, take this bread, drink this cup, we remember that Christ became one of us, ate with us, drank with us, lived with us, died for us, and by rising from the dead lifted our souls from sin and death. As we join around this table, we do not look to a flashy new future; we look to a gracious, enduring past. And we remember that in Ezekiel 16, even as God rebuked the people for their "sin of forgetfulness," he promised them "yet I will remember my covenant with you" and "you shall know that I am the Lord, in order that you may remember . . . when I forgive all that you have done, says the Lord God."

BLESSING: We have many challenges ahead of us. But we have Christ and all his saints behind us. Surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses, we remember.