

Forgetting and Remembering

Matthew 26:31-35 and 69-75
Covenant Presbyterian Church
Palm Sunday, April 9, 2017

In the gospel reading last week from Matthew 16, Jesus asked his disciples “Who do you say that I am?” Peter affirmed Jesus as the Christ, and Jesus said Peter would be the Rock on whom the church would be built. Just a few minutes ago, you heard the account of Peter pledging to never deny Jesus.

But Peter is human like the rest of us. Listen for the account of Peter’s denial.

+ + + + +

Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard.

A servant-girl came to him and said,

“You also were with Jesus the Galilean.”

But he denied it before all of them, saying,

“I do not know what you are talking about.”

When he went out to the porch, another servant-girl saw him,
and she said to the bystanders,

“This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.”

Again he denied it with an oath,

“I do not know the man.”

After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter,

“Certainly you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you.”

Then he began to curse, and he swore an oath,

“I do not know the man!”

At that moment the cock crowed.

Then Peter remembered what Jesus had said:

“Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.”

And he went out and wept bitterly.

+ + + + +

If you were Peter, what would you do?

The Teacher that you had pledged to follow was being criticized by the political and religious leaders of the day—the ones who had all the power. This Teacher had been proclaiming the Kingdom of God, which was seen as a threat to the Empire. It seemed

certain that the Teacher would be arrested and maybe worse. He had told his followers that he was going to die, so their fear is understandable.

In the face of all that, how many of us would say, “Yeah, I’m with him.”

But Peter had made an affirmation of faith and Jesus called him the Rock. We heard this last week. And just a few minutes ago, Peter promised to never deny Jesus.

But he did. Not just once, but three times.

If the story ended there it would be sad. But if we keep reading the Bible, we see how Jesus forgave Peter, in John’s gospel, and how Peter became a powerful leader in the early church.

Two thousand years later, here in Madison, Wisconsin, denial of Jesus doesn’t seem to be our primary issue. Forgetting does.

We gather here and affirm our faith in various ways, and then we go into the world, and like Peter we sometimes do great things, and sometimes we fail.

I think sometimes we just forget. We forget God’s love for us and God’s call for us to follow Jesus. We forget the teachings of Jesus. We forget our good intentions and we get distracted and all too often we make poor choices and we waste our time.

+ + + + +

In the month of January, I invited the congregation to read the gospel according to Matthew, all 28 chapters, by reading one chapter a day for the first 28 days of January. I made the invitation several times, and I tried to be encouraging. I don’t like guilt trips any more than anyone else. To help with the invitation of reading Matthew, we had a devotional, written by members of the congregation, and a sermon series on Matthew, and adult education classes on Matthew.

Last month I gave a survey about the invitation to read Matthew in January in three different group meetings. The results were fascinating.

1. Do you think this was a good idea?

5. Yes, definitely 33	4. Pretty good 5	3. So so 0	2. Not really 0	1. Not at all 0
--------------------------	---------------------	---------------	--------------------	--------------------

2. Did **you** read Matthew 1-28 on January 1-28.

5. Yes, every day 10	4. Most days 12	3. Some 8	2. A few 5	1. Not at all 3
-------------------------	--------------------	--------------	---------------	--------------------

That’s an average of almost 4.9 for the first question and 3.4 for the second question. Many people thought this was a good idea but didn’t do it.

I also asked those who didn’t read Matthew why they didn’t. People said they had good intentions but then they were too busy or they forgot.

One respondent who did not read Matthew wrote: “This is very worthwhile and I need to take on the challenge.” Another respondent, who did not read wrote “Keep at it I will.” Maybe that person was too busy watching Star Wars.

Several people across the spectrum of answers made it clear that they appreciated the invitation and welcomed the opportunity, and they encouraged me to keep inviting the congregation to read and pray and grow spiritually.

So in the spirit of encouraging one another, and in the spirit of Lent, I invite you one more time to consider our JUST LENT emphasis, by thinking about fasting, praying, and acting in the final week of this season.

Maybe during this Holy Week you could take the challenge of reading some scripture, fasting from something, praying, and acting for justice.

We have extra copies of the devotional in the back of the sanctuary and I included a link in our weekly CONNECTIONS email.

Any time is a good time to read, pray, and act—especially this week.

Those of you who have been using this devotional know that there is an invitation to read a different passage from Matthew each day. I picked 7 key passages to help our reflection.

One of those passages is from Matthew 28 the last chapter in Matthew. We've read it in worship the past two Sundays, with the baptisms that we've had. These final words of Jesus are known as the Great Commission, where he tells his disciples to go and baptize.

In this well know teaching of Jesus, there are five imperatives. Five commands. Go, make disciples, baptize, and teach—those are the first four. Do you know what the final commandment of Jesus is in Matthew's gospel, the final teaching?

Remember. The last thing Jesus says to his disciples is "Remember I am with you always."

Remember. As if Jesus really knows that we are forgetful people.

All of us experience day to day forgetfulness. We can't remember where we put the car keys. We walk into another room and forgot why. We stand in the aisle of the store trying to remember what else we need.

We all to that. But Jesus is talking about a deeper sort of forgetting and remembering. We sometimes forget our identity as beloved children of God.

Years ago I heard a father talk about the challenge of raising teenagers. He talked about how he tried to instill good values and to empower good decision-making. He hoped and prayed his parenting would take root. When his kids got old enough to go out with friends on Fridays and Saturday nights, he would often say to them as they left: "Remember who you are."

When we forget who we are as Christians, when we do foolish and selfish things, we need to remember that God lovingly and graciously calls us back.

+ + + + +

I remember about 20 years ago when I signed up for a one week retreat on prayer and spirituality with the Shalem Institute in Maryland. It seemed like something I needed in my busy life.

I arrived late for the first gathering. I walked into a room, where there were about 30 people sitting in a circle. I found a seat and sat down. Everyone else had their eyes closed, so I closed mine, expecting to hear a spoken prayer. After 30 seconds or so, I heard nothing.

I peeked, and saw everyone else was sitting silently with their eyes closed. So I closed mine again.

After another minute or two, which seemed like a really long time, I opened my eyes. Still nothing. The silence continued for about 20 minutes. I remember thinking something like “I paid money for this?” Finally, someone said “Amen” and we started talking.

That was my first experience with what is often called centering prayer. Over the course of the week, we did this many times—sitting in silence for 20 or 30 minutes—and at one point we had a 36 hour period of silence. Other people seemed pretty comfortable with this but I had a hard time. During the silent times, my mind wandered all over the place and I certainly didn’t feel very prayerful or spiritual much of the time.

But the leader of that retreat, a man named Tilden Edwards, said something that kept me going. He told us during the silent prayer something like this:

During the time of silent prayer, you will almost certainly lose focus and your mind will wander. When that happens, don’t beat yourself up. Be kind to yourself. Gently and graciously refocus and remember, and bring yourself back into God’s presence. Remember that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Remember that God patiently and persistently calls you to new life.

I have been so grateful for those words over the course of my life, as they acknowledge the reality that we wander off, that we lose focus, we make mistakes, and we forget. And his words help us to remember that God is kind and gracious, continually forgiving us, and calling us back, calling us to go further.

So I think a primary task of being a Christian is remembering. Remembering the words of Scripture. Remembering that Jesus came to call us to turn away from sin and turn to new purpose and new life. Remember that God loves us and that God is with us until the end of the age.

Weekly worship helps me remember. But I’m good at forgetting, at wandering off, so I need more help to remember in between Sundays. Time for reading and prayer help me. Enjoying fresh air and God’s creation help me. Fellowship with the community helps me.

And because I know I am very forgetful, I've built in a time of prayerful remembering into my daily routine. In the morning, as I'm getting ready for the day, I try to be prayerful.

- I put on my watch and I ask God to help me make good use of the time
- I put on this leather bracelet I got in Central America, and I pray for people who are poor or struggling—near and far
- I put on my wedding ring, and I ask God to help me be a good husband and a good father.
- I put on this cross, and I ask God to help me be a faithful Christian.

As we journey into this Holy Week, we wave our palm branches and remember Jesus is our king. We gather around the table where Jesus offers the bread of life, saying do this in remembrance of me. We remember the crucifixion of Jesus. And we remember the good news of Easter that sin and death do not have the final word.

Thanks be to God. Amen.