

Memories by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. C1061231
Colossians 3:12-21, Deut. 8:11-20
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As I remember correctly, it was John Gehl who pointed out to me the importance of something we take for granted: our memory. He is a court stenographer and once had to deal with a man who had lost his ability to remember. That may not seem like much to you. We've all forgotten a person's name or phone number, but what if you lost all memory? This man had been successful. He had a family and had built a house. Then, he had a motorcycle accident which injured his brain to the extent that all of his memory was lost. The dialogue in court went like this:

"What's your name?"

"I don't know."

"Your name is Bill. Are you married?"

"I don't know."

"Where do you live?"

"I can't remember."

"Do you have any children?"

"I don't know."

"What's your name?"

"I can't remember."

He was asked what he would do with a letter he might find on the street. He didn't know it was supposed to go to the post office. He didn't remember about police and their function in society. He knew enough to start a fire in a fireplace, but he kept stoking it, not remembering how much fuel should be in the fire, and it soon was raging outside the fireplace. He even had to relearn walking and still could not walk normally, because walking is predicated on memory.

Our memories are extremely important to our normal functioning. We know just from the times an anniversary or birthday have been forgotten. Memories from the past teach us how to live in the present and lead us into the future. We know a stove is hot because of prior experience with heat and stoves. If you're burned once, you can remember not to do the same thing to get burned again. History is the process of recalling the past so we will not be condemned to relive past mistakes.

Memories consist of cherished times with children. We remember what they like at birth, and at various stages as they grew up. How refreshing those memories can be. We remember our childhoods, when our grandparents took care of us and gave special gifts and attention. We remember the scoldings we got for doing things we shouldn't have. Memories are totally involved in the maturation process. I remember the time my brother and I were throwing snowballs at cars, and as fate would have it, he threw one that broke the windshield of a car and had to face the driver's and our mother's anger. Because of that memory, I learned that snowballs shouldn't be thrown at cars. So, memories are at the seat of moral decision-making and judging between right and wrong.

In our adult lives as Christians, memories serve the important function of making us sensitive to others. We can remember how it felt when someone said we looked fat or skinny, or when another broke a special confidence. We remember how good it felt when someone stuck up for us or listened to our problems. We remember, and can do two things with our memories. We can use them to make others feel loved and accepted, or we can make others feel miserable and wretched. As we've been hurt, so we remember how to hurt others. We also remember Jesus' teachings about treating others the way we want to be treated. So, we can make others feel good because we remember how.

Childhood memories leave imprints on our lives, many of them good, warm, and comforting. Some are terrible, and leave long-lasting negative imprints on our lives. Sometimes in our unconscious, there lies the memory of being molested, or abused, and it comes out from the memory later to affect the present, with a mistrust of others or the inability to be warm and friendly. Negative imprints can destroy dating or marital happiness. They can cause isolation and even hatred and destruction.

We cannot consciously remember everything. We store a lot of information. We also have a built-in overload protection. Sometimes it takes time and effort to get information out of our memories. We select what we recall from our memories, as any parent can tell us. “Where are your shoes?”

“I forget where I put them.”

Kids can tell us adults about selective recall too. “Remember? You promised I could go there.”

It is important to develop our sense of recall, because we can remember good and necessary things to the exclusion of the negative. Negative imprints can be overshadowed by remembering good ones.

Memory is a part of faith. The Bible itself is an attempt to remember – or keep in mind– the actions of God in human history. In the early days of the Christian church, there was no need to have a written account of Jesus and his actions. Then, the original twelve apostles began dying off. Followers recognized the need to write the gospels to remember the things that Jesus taught.

The Bible contains records of God’s remembering the covenant with people. God remembered Noah and Rachel and gave them happiness. There are accounts of God’s remembering the evil works that people did. There are other accounts of God’s not remembering the evil deeds of the people because they asked for forgiveness and tried to do God’s will. In some instances, the Israelites remembered their God and did the things that God willed. In others, they forgot God and worshiped idols and other gods, and were consequently destroyed.

For people in Biblical times, “remembering” had a different connotation. To remember someone was actually to bring them back into existence. If no one remembered you after you died, you had no spiritual existence. That is why tombs and cemeteries were so important. You would be remembered through your children or through memorials such as gravestones, and therefore, you continued a spiritual existence.

For the Hebrews, to remember something was to bring it back out of the past and into the present. Remembering God’s great saving acts of the past meant that God was still doing saving acts in the present. How true that is, when you stop to think about it. As we remember God’s gifts and saving acts of the past, we are made mindful – we remember– that God is acting today. We see common events in a different light. It was a series of strange coincidences that brought me here to be the minister of this congregation. But, as I remember God’s saving acts in history, I see that coincidental events are not coincidences, but God’s acting in my life. I “remembered” that God continues to act.

For the Hebrew people, religious worship consisted of reciting the story of their salvation by God in the past. They would tell how they were slaves in Egypt, and God rescued them, and took them to a new land rich with soil and crops. The reading of Deuteronomy 8:11-20 is one such recitation annually during worship. This remembering brought God’s salvation out of the past and made it a present reality. In communion, as we eat bread and drink wine, we use Jesus’ words, “Do this in remembrance of me.” As we eat and drink, we remember Jesus’ death which sets us free. We bring an action out of the past and make it a present action. We are set free today. Jesus comes alive in us– he continues a spiritual existence in us today, as we remember his past saving act.

Our memories are very important, because we learn through them. They are also important because they affect our present living. We remember our childhood experiences, and in this way we bring to life God’s loving care for us. I remember the births of my daughters Emily and Maggie, and therefore remember the miracle of life God gives us, not just then, but every day.

I remember events of the year just ending. Because I remember those events, I know I do not live in isolation. I know God is calling me to remember my brothers and sisters in need, and to act to bring about justice and mercy. God also calls me to celebrate with thanksgiving those happy, positive events in world community life.

Thank God for memory. I pray that I would use memory to do good and to share compassion. I pray that I would always remember God’s mercy on us, and thus keep God in my present.