

Sermon for Sunday, October 29, 2017

The Stuff of Memory

One of our members recently moved into a retirement facility, which meant she had to downsize significantly. She had to get rid of a lot of stuff, and that's hard. But what makes it hard is not the stuff itself. I mean who cares about an old couch, a stained throw rug, and that underused dining room set? What makes it hard is the memories each piece of stuff evokes. She and her deceased husband spent many happy evenings sitting on that couch. The throw rug got stained when her daughter's chemistry experiment went awry, and the dining room set was used for Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter dinners with the family. What makes getting rid of stuff difficult and heartbreaking is the memories it evokes. This is "the memory of stuff." Will we remember if we no longer have the stuff? Museums are repositories of such stuff, but most of the stuff in museums doesn't evoke personal memories for us. It's just interesting stuff.

Will we remember if we no longer have our stuff? That penetrating question is answered, in part, by those fellow citizens, who in hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, and fires, like we've seen recently on the news, lose everything they own, all their stuff. Though sad, they all say essentially the same thing. We lost our stuff, but we have each other, and that's what is really important. There is nothing like losing all your stuff to put its value into perspective. Stuff is replaceable. People aren't.

It also makes me think about what I would grab of my stuff if disaster threatened my home. Not the couch certainly, or the stained carpet. I wouldn't grab the silver either, even it would be prudent to do so. I'd grab the wedding album, the family photos, and the videos of my children growing up. You too I'm sure. Because what is really important to me is not the memory of stuff, but is the stuff of memory.

The memory of stuff is fleeting. Often the stuff becomes clutter and eventually junk. It's all just another version of the Golden Calf, a contemporary idol that competes for our attention, allegiance, and devotion. But the stuff of memory endures, because it's the stuff of relationships, and they always endure, now and forever. One of my fellow trustees on the Board of Princeton Theological Seminary is the CEO of General Dynamics Corporation, and on the lock screen of her iPad, is a picture not of a tank, or an aircraft, or a weapons system, but of her three daughters, which she refers to as her life's work. That's the stuff of memory.

The Bible is all about the stuff of memory, the history, the stories, and the traditions that have shaped God's people for millennia. "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor," is where the story begins (Deut. 26:5), and it ends in the vision of God's new heaven and new earth (Rev. 21:1). The stuff of memory is the story of the Exodus from Egypt, the journey in the wilderness to a land flowing with milk and honey, the birth of a baby in a manger in Bethlehem, the suffering of the son of God on the cross, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, the coming of the Holy Spirit, the promise of salvation and everlasting life in the embrace of a loving God, and the birth of the church of Jesus Christ. And as members of that church, we are part and parcel of the stuff of memory, participants in that which will endure both now and forever. The stories of the Bible and the traditions of the church and Christ's followers, is our story too because through faith, we have a relationship with it all, and relationships, all of them, endure.

Today we mark the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, and though we do so once again with a Kirking of the Tartan, it's not the tartans that we celebrate—there is no memory of stuff here—but the families they represent, our families, and the story they tell, which is our story as members of the Presbyterian church. Just as the Exodus from Egypt is part of our story, so too is the Reformation. It is the stuff of memory, and the stuff of memory endures. It is the stuff of the Shema from Deuteronomy, the prayer with which every Jew begins his or her day, and the first prayer every Jewish child learns:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut. 6:4-9)

“Teacher,” asks a lawyer, “which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Jesus answered with the stuff of memory, beginning with the opening command of the Shema, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” And with that answer, Jesus reforms the faith. He doesn’t change it. He doesn’t reduce the Law of Moses or diminish its importance. He simply calls the faithful back to the heart, and soul, and mind of the whole matter, which is what reform does. Love the Lord your God, and love your neighbor as yourself. Easy to remember, straightforward advice, and the sure path to abundant life revealed to us by God’s very self. Do this, and live.

Another lawyer, John Calvin, the theological founding father of our Presbyterian expression of the Christian faith, also reformed the faith by calling us back to its heart, soul, and mind. He wrote powerfully about the Ten Commandments. But whereas in worship, Martin Luther had the commandments read prior to the confession of sin, so that hearing them we would feel convicted of our failure to follow them and confess, Calvin had the commandments read after the confession of sin, that having received the assurance of God’s forgiveness, we would be strengthened by God’s grace to live them. Calvin knew that though love of God cannot be reduced to love of neighbor, our lives best conform to God’s will when they bear fruit for our neighbor.¹

We should not be surprised that Jesus, when asked to name the one greatest commandment, names two, and forever links them together into an inseparable unity. The commandments can’t be parsed; they are a whole. They tell us how to do the two things the lead to life: to love the Lord our God and to love the neighbor God has given us, and though they are a unity, the order is important. Our love for God is primary; it is first, and it leads us to love our neighbor whom God has given us, not for gain but for our neighbor’s own good. That’s what Calvin understood. Love for God and neighbor is Jesus’ gentle yoke, who said, “my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Life’s goal, if we believe in God, is to live where love of God and of neighbor are as one, where Jesus lived, and moved, and had his being. It’s hard to live there, and at best we do so momentarily, which is why we do all things in the name of Jesus, because our hope is in him, and in his faith, not in ourselves. But we try to live there because we know it is the way to eternal life, the way to God’s life, a life that bears fruit for all.

When David Greenhaw, the president of Eden Theological Seminary, was here in August to preach to us, we talked before the service, and I said, “David, I really think the case could be made that the increasing incivility in our society is in direct proportion to the decline in worship attendance and church participation.” He surprised me by agreeing wholeheartedly, but added that the increasing ignorance of Reformed theology, upon which our form of representative government is based, is the root cause of our government’s increasing ineffectiveness.

We simply must, as disciples of Jesus Christ, love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves. May we always be found to be reforming ourselves into Christ’s body: into his image, his faith, his mercy, his compassion, his joy, and his sacrificial love, to the everlasting glory of our awesome God. May we be found in his body, which is the church, worshipping and serving with one another as befits Christ’s followers. And may we always continue to live the stuff of memory. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

PRAYER: Almighty and most glorious God, awesome in power and might, strong in love and compassion, and committed to justice and forgiveness, we praise you and worship you and thank you our great God. Reform our faith, and empower us, your chosen and called people, to love you with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves, that the day will come when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord. We ask it in his strong name. Amen.

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Matthew 22:34-46

¹ Johnson, William Stacy, John Calvin, Reformer for the 21st Century, (Nashville: Westminster John Knox, 2009) p. 74-75.