

The Influence of Memory

Luke 24:13-35

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If you were here in worship last Sunday, you may right now be thinking of Yogi Berra's famous quote: "It's déjà vu all over again." Yes, the scripture read from Luke is the same today as last Sunday, and the sermon title has the exact same four words, but two are reversed. Last week, the title was "The Memory of Influence," where we focused on two grieving disciples of Jesus being able to remember Jesus' transforming influence in their lives when they heard him teach from Scripture – sort of – but they REALLY remembered his influence on them when they saw the stranger – who seemed vaguely familiar – (when they saw him) break bread before a meal. Today, let's reverse the two nouns in last week's title and explore "the influence of memory," particularly memory which is life-changing. Certain memories can be nothing but traumatic, for sure; yet memories of what is grounded in God's holiness lead back to the positive and the sacred. Such memories of God's holiness from the past influence people to sense and realize that newness of life can sprout and grow in the present, although adversity, pressure, and death have reached out in the past and are actively reaching out in the present to claim each and every person.

Tragi-comedy is a literary and theatre phrase which means that what is tragic can be mixed with and even be held back – or overcome – by what is related to comedy – which is not "ha, ha," but means, more accurately, that the overall outcome of "the positive" exceeds the total triumph of the tragic, or, that the tragic is kicked back by the positive and is, at least, held at bay for the longer term. The story we've read and heard again this morning is a sort of tragi-comedy, because Jesus' death by crucifixion, his burial, and the mysterious disappearance of his body have left grieving disciples absolutely disillusioned. Jesus' being "re-recognized," though, (in the faith-tradition language) by way of God's resurrection power, is the surprising – even stunning – "comedy" resolution – the transforming "good news" which follows the unspeakably inhumane set of events in which Jesus is executed and his followers intimidated.

Think with me through three brief stories – two of which are fiction, but could be true, and one of which actually happened; but all three exemplify the tragi-comedy nature of life as we experience it.

The first ... In 1970, Southern writer Eudora Welty published the novel, "Losing Battles." It's a story told about a Sunday and Monday during the Great Depression in rural Mississippi, with the setting being the extended family gathering for the 90th birthday of Granny Vaughn. Half-way through the novel, word comes to Granny's birthday reunion that Miss Julia Mortimer has been found dead near her mailbox on a county road a few miles away. Miss Julia was the classroom teacher of the county school where most of Granny's extended family attended. News of Miss Julia's death interrupts their celebration. Three comments reveal elements of both Miss Julia and the way children and youth perceived her when they were students and remembered her years later. Uncle Percy remembers: "Miss Julia had designs on everybody. She wanted a doctor and a lawyer and all else we might have to holler for some day. So she'd get behind every barefooted boy and push! . . . She wanted us to learn something if it was to kill us!" (p.235). Uncle Noah remembers: "She thought if she mortified you long enough, you might have hope of turning out something you wasn't!" (p.236). Aunt Birdie remembers: "When the tornado was over our school, and the roof came off, and the wind started to suck up the unabridged dictionary to get it to fly away, I think I saw her throw herself on the big book to hold it down. She first told us to hold onto each other, but then she had us sit on the floor with her and push against the walls to keep them walls from falling in!" (pgs.237-38). Those were perceptions and stories which influenced (1) who Granny's family grew up to be, and (2) how they remembered their classroom teacher's "swimming against the stream" of apathy and hardship, as eccentric as she was..

Second ... A month ago at the memorial service in Dallas, following the death of 83 year old Bob Shelton, one of Bob's former students told a story. He said that in 1969 Bob and two other pastors from Memphis drove to Nashville to receive an award from the Committee of Southern Churchmen, which recognized their leadership with the Memphis chapter of Southern Churchmen working to advance inter-

racial reconciliation and equal civil rights among white and black citizens in Memphis both before and after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination in April of the year before. They were presented an engraved Sterling silver tray for their association. On the return trip, the weather had turned significantly colder, the roads were becoming icy, and the young preachers were hungry. They pulled over at a truck stop, put gasoline in the tank, bought a chicken dinner to go, and one of them saw a shivering dog next to the building. He looked at the pup's collar, noticed that his name was Buck, and that his vet clinic was in Memphis. He asked Bob if they could take Buck with them back to Memphis to unite with the pup's family. Bob reluctantly agreed. They crowded into the car, and at some point not far down the road, Bob found himself rapidly approaching a jack-knifed 18-wheel truck and trailer, which was transporting crates of boxes of shoes, now spilled on the road behind the wide open doors of the trailer lying on its side. Bob tried to maintain control of his car but ended up in the snowy and icy ditch with his car tilted, one side high and the other side low. In the confusion, the pastor in the back seat reached to open the door on the low side of the tilt. Buck jumped over him, and in the process, dislodged the silver platter and the chicken dinner. All three humans eventually got out. Two went after Buck; the other gathered the silver platter and the chicken. When they all eventually were back in the car waiting for a wrecker (including the frightened dog), Bob said: "Isn't this exactly what people say about us preachers? Trying to get a chicken dinner; chasing a buck; and hoping to find their recognition, while all around are ten thousand lost soles, scattered everywhere, waiting to be found." The story is comedic, but any who hear it realize that those three preachers were where they were because they – in their community – had faced conflict, racism, trauma, and death in the hope of new days dawning with potential from God's love still alive.

Third is the story of three nuns attending a Major League Baseball game. It may or may not have been their first, but they came with pennants to wave and excitement to share. Early their team made a remarkable play. They leapt from their seats, waved their pennants and gave each other "high fives" while cheering. One of three men seated directly behind them said loudly, "Someday soon I think I'll move to Utah; because there are only fifty nuns in the entire state." In the fourth inning, the nuns' team scored several runs. Again they stood and celebrated. A second man then added loudly, "Someday soon, I think I'll move to Montana, because there are only twenty-five nuns in the entire state." In the eighth inning there was another occasion for the nuns to celebrate, and they did so. The third man then said loudly: "Someday soon, I think I'll move to Idaho, because there are only ten nuns in the entire state." One of the nuns then turned around, folded her hands, and said politely: "I have another suggestion. You all three could move to Hell, because there aren't any nuns living there." It's worth our laughter, but the Sister's comeback-joke to those three men addresses face-to-face their and others' religious resentment, disrespect, prejudice, and even violence across the years of history, against Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Muslims, etc.

Rabbi Irving Greenberg, in 2004, published "For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity." In the book he advances the understanding of "tikun olam" – translated "repairing the world" (p.55). He's convinced Jews, Christians, Muslims, and others can live with all others expressing acts of respectful love as understood from the covenant of faithfulness God has established and threaded throughout creation since time began. Rabbi Greenberg advocates human service in life and history which accepts God's hiddenness and self-limitation (in Hebrew: "tzimtzum" – pgs.90-93,222), which Rabbi Greenberg, in fact, mentions with Christians' sense of Jesus' resurrection. We continue to live as humans, with the memory from history of God's love which is alive-anew, but which sacred love "lives" still amid trauma, devastation, hatred, sin, death, and without vanquishing what torments and harms. The testimony of Scripture, though, contends that God mysteriously stays faithful, because that's the way God is. Life and history for you and me and others is a tragi-comedy. The tragedy of Jesus' crucifixion and experiences of tragedy among people before and after Jesus' crucifixion is evident enough. The comedy is not "ha-ha" and is certainly not permanent. The call to live through love from God, though, is a call to all of God's people all of the time. We are influenced for serving God's healing, from the memory of God's holiness, even when sacred love seems hidden. Serving God's healing from sacred love, our lives are made new each day. – All honor and praise be to God.