

Jeremiah 31:31-34 Pastor Bill Uetricht Reformation 10/28/18

We're all used to hearing the imperative, "You must forgive and forget." And most of us will bear witness to the fact that we might be able to forgive, but we can't forget.

I know that's true for me. When I have been harmed by someone or my relationship has been tainted by someone's action, or even when my actions have harmed another or tainted a relationship, I find it hard to forget what happened. I don't want that to be the case. I want the relationship to go back to what it was before the struggle. But I must admit that there is a part of me that holds back because I can't forget what happened. Sin has this way of leaving its mark. Forgetting is no easy task. It almost seems like a task that humans cannot accomplish. We're proficient at remembering, especially at remembering hurt, pain, insult, struggle.

Jeremiah tells us something remarkable today. In a portion of the book that is known as the Book of Consolation—frankly one of the only happy portions of what really is a downer of a book—Jeremiah promises that there are days that are surely coming when God is going to do a new thing, a new thing that clearly would be welcomed by a nation that is in great pain. In these days, Jeremiah says, God will make a new covenant with both Judah and *Israel*, the latter country a nation that at Jeremiah's time didn't exist. The whole people of God, in other words, will be back together again in one land.

And this covenant won't be like the covenant that God made with his people when he rescued them out of the hands of the Egyptians. It's not that this covenant—the one that occurred in the exodus out of Egypt and the giving of the law—was a bad thing. No, it was a great thing! But here was the problem. The people of God didn't keep their part of the covenant. They broke it, even though God was like a husband to them—their protector, their lover. This time the covenant is going to be kept because of what God is going to do. God is going to

write the covenant on the hearts of his people. He's going to change them from the inside out.

By the way, it appears that that's the only kind of change that brings true lasting results. A lot of us think that we are going to change ourselves or other people by pointing the finger and insisting or demanding a big change in behavior. This is what we often try to do with diets. They are often a matter of finger pointing and denial. Now don't get me wrong. Denying yourself the sixteenth fudge brownie can serve some good purposes. Changing your behavior can sometimes bring about change in your life. But what I think we generally discover is that denial or diets work for a while, but they often don't produce long-term results because true change occurs from the inside out. True change occurs when our relationship with food is transformed. Sometimes you have to fake it until you make it. But true change occurs when something new is written on our hearts.

That's what God, through Jeremiah, is going to do for his people. He is going to write the law, the Torah, the teaching, on their hearts. They won't have to teach one another anymore, something at which Jews were specialists. They won't have to teach each other to know the Lord, for they all will know the Lord, from the garbage collector to the king.

And what's going to enable this great transformation? God will forgive their sin and *remember it no more*. What's going to bring about the true newness is God's forgiveness and his selective amnesia. He's not going to remember their sin anymore. What I can't do, and I have a feeling, you can't do, God will do. He's going to forget their brokenness, their worship of false gods, their neglect for the poor and the left out. God specializes in forgetting.

David Lose says that God's forgetting really in some ways "is a startling, unexpected, and even a somewhat uncomfortable way of talking about God. We are normally so afraid of losing our memory that it's almost unthinkable [for us]." And yet, sometimes we wish we could

forget. We wish we could forget what has been done to us. We wish we could forget what we've done to others.

You wonder if part of Israel's problem at the time of the prophet Jeremiah was that they couldn't forget. They are overwhelmed by what others have done to them and also what they have done: their unfaithfulness, their unwillingness to trust God, their propensity to go after every god that comes down the street. You wonder if they are not feeling a little paralyzed. How many of us are paralyzed by what we can't forget? How many of us find it hard to move forward because the past haunts us, the sin done to us and the sin done by us. Many of us are crippled, locked up in our own memory. We remember too much. But *God* forgets!

Today we celebrate the Reformation. And its primary meaning is not that Lutherans are better than Baptists or Catholics or that we can only sing songs out of the 16th century. The most significant gift from the Reformation is the insight that when it comes to the life of faith we need to start with the God. The theologians sometimes call this the "primacy of God." Before you go talking about what you should do, must do, have to do, you need to talk about what God does. Before you go shaking your finger at people, telling them how they ought to live and must live, you need to talk about who God is and how God lives. Before life becomes all about a bunch of rules, achievements, a score card to fill out, you need to hear about God's grace. Before you think love is something you, through your determined efforts, have to fashion, you need to hear about a love that begins it all and ends it all. Before you start judging your worth and meaning on the basis of the scorecard that you have that has been so beneficial to your remembering, you need to remember this message: God forgets. It all begins with God, not you!

The Apostle Paul puts it this way: "No human being will be justified in God's sight by deeds prescribed by the law! All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; [all] are now justified by God's grace as a gift." Life is not first a matter of you figuring it all out, you having a

better score card than other people, you, as the gospel reading makes quite clear, coming from the right ethnic club, you having more money than others, more popularity, more fame, more religious deeds, you having less to forget. No! Life is fundamentally about grace given, not earned, love granted, not achieved, forgiveness received, not purchased. Life is not about a score-keeping God but rather, a God who forgets.

God has selective amnesia. He forgets your and my sin. But trust me. God doesn't forget everything. He remembers his grace, his love, his mercy, his covenant. In the great Noah story in the book of Genesis, we are told that "God *remembered* Noah and all the wild and domestic animals that were with him in the ark." In the end of the story, we learn that the rainbow that he puts in the sky will help him *remember* the covenant that he has with all that is. God forgets, but remembers what really needs to be remembered. He remembers his love for everything and everybody, including you!

God forgets your sin and remembers it no more. Yet God remembers his grace, his love, his mercy. You know, when Martin Luther learned that, he had a freedom he had never had before. In our gospel reading for today, the Greek word that is translated "made free" is "eleutheria." Because of that verb, Martin changed his name from Luder to Luther. The grace of God set Luther free. It sets you and me free, too. A God who forgets our sin and remembers his grace and mercy is a God who sets us free *from* the confines of our past and sets us free *for* a life marked not by score keeping, but by grace, love, and forgiveness. Who knows, but maybe in such a life we'll even learn how to forget.