

“From Memory”  
Deuteronomy 6:4-12; Mark 12:28-34  
All Saints’ Sunday

November 4, 2018  
Westminster, Greenville  
Ben Dorr

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We have spent the past two months in our fall sermon series exploring one word in each sermon—a word that is essential to our Christian faith.

Do you remember the words?

Hope, grace, surprise, healing, all, power, pray, forgive...  
and today’s word is **remember**.

Which means I want to talk with you this morning about memory.

In fact, let’s test yours right now.

What is it I want to talk with you about this morning?

Good.

Your memory is good!

And yet, memory is a funny thing, right?

Even when we think our memory is good,  
sometimes it’s not as good as we think...

David Isay is the founder of NPR’s StoryCorps, which has become a national treasure trove of every day people’s memories about life and work and love and family.

Isay recounts the time that he interviewed his father for StoryCorps.

Isay says that it was important to him to do the interview, but afterward...well, he didn’t consider the interview to be very memorable.

In fact, the only part of the interview that stood out for Isay was the one part that surprised him. In the interview, Isay asked his father what his dad was most proud of in his life.

This is a very common question.

In all sorts of StoryCorps interviews, the interviewee is asked what he or she is most proud of in life. And if that person is a parent, they almost INVARIABLY say that they are most proud of their children.

But Isay remembered how, during his father's interview, his father replied, "My books." In other words, out of 10,000 or 20,000 interviews, everyone ELSE says they are most proud of their children, but David Isay's father says he is most proud of the books he's written.

And Isay teased him mercilessly about this.

Dad—how could you say you were most proud of your books?!!

Then, very suddenly, Isay's father got sick.

He was healthy, he was working, and 10 days later he was dead.

On the night that his father died, David Isay went back and listened to the StoryCorps interview that he had conducted with his father. It was the first time he had listened to that interview since he had done it with his dad.

And they got to the part where David Isay asked his dad what he was most proud of...and Isay's father, in that recorded interview, said, "My children"....  
and David Isay was STUNNED!!

Isay, whose job it is to interview people, and to remember what people tell him—he FORGOT the most important thing his own father had told him!!

He failed to remember that his father told him that he was proud of him.<sup>1</sup>  
Why is that?

I don't mean why did David Isay forget.  
Why do any of us forget what's most important?  
Why do our memories work the way they do?

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Our subject this morning is memory.

I raise the subject of memory this morning for a number of reasons.

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<sup>1</sup> As told to Krista Tippett in her interview with David Isay, in the podcast "On Being," April 17, 2014, found at <http://www.onbeing.org/program/dave-isay-the-everyday-art-of-listening/transcript/6274>.

The first reason is that the act of remembering was very important to Jesus.

This morning's story is an excellent example.

A scribe comes to Jesus, and asks him which commandment is first of all.

Jesus replies, "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 mind, and with all your strength." The second is this, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Foundational words. Now...where did Jesus get those words?

Did Jesus CREATE that answer all on his own?

No, not at all.

The first commandment comes from Deuteronomy 6, which we heard this morning—the Shema. And the second commandment, the one about loving our neighbor...does anyone know where that comes from?

The book of Leviticus, chapter 19, verse 18.

In other words, Jesus' understanding of the most important part of HIS faith—it was NOT his own invention. ***He remembered it.*** The Jewish faith that Jesus practiced was passed down to him, taught to him by people who loved him and came before him.

Which brings me to the second reason that I raise the subject of memory this morning. These two great commandments are not uniquely Christian commandments. They are JEWISH commandments.

They come first not from our faith tradition, but from the Jewish tradition. And it's very important for Christians to remember that.

When the PNC was interviewing me for the position of pastor, I recall one member asking how I handle topics that make the national news that are on many people's minds.

I replied that it depends on the event, and on what I believe needs to be said from the pulpit on that particular occasion.

So here we are.

Eight days ago in Pittsburgh, 11 Jews were murdered in what was the deadliest act of antisemitism in our country's history.

What needs to be said on this occasion?

First things first. I think it must be said by every Christian and every church that there is NO PLACE, absolutely zero room, for antisemitism and bigotry in our Christian faith.

Christians have no excuse for looking the other way.

Christians have no excuse for staying silent about antisemitism, which is, unfortunately, still alive in our society today.

In fact, Christians must do more than that. We have a responsibility to fight it and expose antisemitism for the evil that it is. To learn about the different ways that it's been a part not only of our country's history, but also of the Church's history. And then we must call it out when we see it...in a co-worker, or a family member, or a neighbor, or anywhere it rears its ugly and dangerous head.

This past Monday and Tuesday, the staff here at Westminster discussed how we might respond to what happened in Pittsburgh.

One step is that the leadership of Westminster, both staff and Session, are in the process of reaching out to rabbis and synagogues here in town. We do so not only to show our solidarity with those congregations during this time, but also so we can strengthen our relationship as a faith community with our Jewish brothers and sisters here in Greenville.

You see, the question is not whether we have a connection with those faith communities. The question is whether we will SEE that connection, whether we will honor that connection, and whether we will act on the connection that already exists between our two faith traditions...

Now...some of you may be thinking this is all fine and good.

But today is All Saints' Sunday.  
What does all this have to do with All Saints' Sunday?

A lot.

I believe that one of the most fundamental concepts behind All Saints' Sunday—indeed, one of the most fundamental ideas of the Christian faith—is that we are all connected to a story MUCH GREATER than ourselves.

It is a story that God is writing.

It's a story that God began with a covenant...with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.

It's a story that continues, in our Christian tradition, with Jesus.  
It's a story about loving God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength...and loving our neighbor as ourselves.

Which brings me to the third reason that I want to talk with you about memory this morning.

What are we asked to do, on All Saints' Sunday?  
On this day, we are asked to REMEMBER OUR STORY.

We recall the saints of our lives, those people who have played vital roles in our story. Those who came before us, who loved us and shared God's grace with us and if it weren't for them, we know we wouldn't be the person we are today.

Are you remembering anyone right now?  
Anyone who helped pass this tradition down to you?

About whom in your life would you say—you know, if it weren't for this person, I would not be the person I am today?

My second year of seminary, I was a hospital chaplain one day each week. It was my first experience visiting people in hospitals. And frankly, I was a nervous wreck.

I didn't like hospitals...didn't like the smell of hospitals, didn't like the feel of hospitals.

The first family I ever visited as a chaplain was in the emergency room.  
They all stood around a bed.  
Their loved one was lying on the bed.

I asked how she was doing...they told me.  
I asked how they were doing...they said they were ok, given the circumstances.

Then there was this awkward silence, and I didn't know what to say.  
So I just started talking pretty aimlessly.  
And then...more silence.  
Awkward silence.

I was praying that someone would say something.

So the father—the one whose mother was on the e.r. bed—he gave me a warm smile, and he restarted the conversation by saying to me, “So, Ben...are you in chaplain training?”

I guess it's not too hard to spot a rookie.  
I was definitely a rookie.  
But it didn't matter to Abe, that I was a rookie.

I met Abe—not that night, but maybe a few weeks later.  
Abe was in the hospital periodically to receive treatment for his cancer.

I visited Abe—I don't know, maybe 10 times during the course of that year.  
And Abe welcomed me into his room.  
And he welcomed me into his life.  
He introduced me to his wife, he told me about his children.

He told me stories about his life, many stories about serving in WWII.  
And I was never nervous when I walked into Abe's room.

When spring rolled around, Abe found himself in the hospital once again, and it was during Passover.

So Abe proposed that I share part of his Passover meal, in his hospital room, with him. He said that in his tradition, it was considered a blessing to invite a guest to share in the Passover meal.

By the end of that year, I had stopped being nervous in hospitals.  
And a large reason for that was Abe.

Abe was nothing less than God's grace for me, modeling a warmth and hospitality that I try to carry with me every time I enter a hospital as a pastor.

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Do you see what we're talking about this morning?  
Memory is so important for our faith, because we are not a SELF-MADE people.

We are an INDEBTED people.  
To follow Jesus is to spend our entire lives living in the red.

We are indebted to the faith of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob,  
the faith of Ruth, the great-grandmother of David,  
the faith of Mary, Jesus' mother...we're indebted to them all.

We are indebted to the people who are listed on the plaque outside the Charter room of this church, those saints who helped build this church. None of us would be here were it not for those people.

We are indebted to anyone who helped show us God's grace and shared with us God's love.

Let me put it like this.

How many people here taught yourself church?  
What it means to be in church, to go to church, to be a member of a church?

You just walked into church one day—as a five-year-old or thirty-five-year old, and you figured it all out, you had this discipleship stuff down...all by yourself?

My parents like to tell the story about one of my early days in church.  
I was maybe two or three years old.

They had me in the very last row of pews...you know, just in case.  
And I was doing fine, behaving well.  
Then the choir got up to sing.  
And there was a soloist that day.  
It was a woman, singing soprano, really beautiful singing.

My parents stood me up on the pew in the back so I could see.  
And the soprano started singing, and for 20 seconds, I just stared at her.  
Then I THREW my arms up into the air, and I started yelling at the top of  
my voice, "STOP! STOP!"

Now today, I know not to do that in church.  
Why do I know not to do that in church?  
Because it was taught to me, modeled for me, passed down to me...

Sometimes we hear talk about the heroes in our lives.  
But I think Christians ought to use a different word.  
We ought to talk about the saints in our lives.

The Rev. Dr. Sam Wells, who used to be at Duke,  
once remarked on the difference between HEROES and SAINTS.

He said, "Stories...with heroes...  
are told to laud the...heroes—  
for if the hero failed, all would be lost.

"By contrast, a saint can fail in a way that the hero can't, because the failure  
of the saint reveals the forgiveness and the new possibilities made in God...the  
saint is just a small character in a story that's always fundamentally about God."<sup>2</sup>

**A small character in a story that's always fundamentally about God.**

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<sup>2</sup> As quoted in *Still: Notes on a Mid-Faith Crisis*, by Lauren Winner, New York: HarperCollins, 2012. Winner has  
quoted from "Theological Ethics," by Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, in *God's Advocates: Christian Thinkers in  
Conversation*, Rupert Shortt, ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005.

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A number of years ago, a former seminary classmate of mine was the pastor of Lamington Presbyterian Church in New Jersey. Shortly before Easter one year, Matt got a call from the local nursing home. He was informed that a resident was dying and that her twin sister—who was also living there—wanted a pastor to come say a prayer.

So Matt went.

Finding the twins' room, he met two women, who were both in their nineties.

The sister who placed the phone call introduced herself as Dr. Francis Craig and her dying sister as Dr. Eleanor Craig. Both of the women had obtained their doctorates in music, studying under Virgil Fox, one of the premier organists of his day.

In their own careers, when many believed that women could not be great organists, these two distinguished musicians played recitals at locations such as Westminster Abbey and Notre Dame.

“It was amazing...” Matt wrote to a colleague after his visit.

“...to see Francis come to life as she spoke of days gone past. I was taken by her story but deeply saddened to see that such accomplished musicians had no CD player or tape player let alone an iPod to comfort them. So, I went down to the nearby Borders and picked up a collection of Bach organ pieces (played by their teacher, Virgil Fox) and returned to the home.

“I cranked up the volume on the CD player so that everyone in the nursing home could hear—with or without hearing devices. As the music swelled, Francis' hands, which are quite clinched, straightened as she played along with her former teacher.

“What a day! We played sister Eleanor into that great mystery.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This story is told by Scott Black Johnston in his sermon, “Indigestible,” as printed in *Journal for Preachers*, Easter, 2012. Johnston quotes from an email that he received from Matt Davis. Matt was a friend and classmate of mine at Princeton Theological Seminary.

Now I remember Matt from our days together in seminary.  
And if you asked him, “What made you think to do that? To go to the store  
and get those Bach organ pieces played by Virgil Fox?”

I don’t think he would say it was his seminary training,  
or his own bright idea.

My bet is that he would attribute that one to God.

To the tradition about God handed down to him:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your  
soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.”

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

It does not take a hero to live by those commandments.  
All it takes is a small character willing to play a small role in a story that’s  
fundamentally about God.

Do you know anyone like that?

In case I’m being too OBLIQUE here, that was a rhetorical question.  
I know you remember people like that.

And what makes me so excited is that every Sunday morning,  
every time I step into this pulpit, I see someone like that.

Because the people I see...are all of you.

Amen.