

March 18, 2018
The Fifth Sunday in Lent

“Forgive and Forget”
by Mary Anne Biggs

Jeremiah 31:31-34 ~ John 12:20-33

I once spoke with a friend who told me about a family reunion that she had attended. She visited with cousins that she hadn't seen in years because she lives on the West Coast and they, for the most part live on the Eastern Seaboard. One cousin brought greetings from her father, a favorite uncle of hers. He is in the far stages of dementia ... lives with the support and care of the staff of a long-term care facility ... and of course was not able to come to this reunion. His daughter brought his greeting ... "Tell my family that, although I do not remember them, I still love them."

That has stayed with me ever since, and in my friend's voice I could hear both a poignant grief and quiet gratitude. The grief came from her childhood memories of a beloved uncle with a quick wit and deep and generous wisdom who now has so few of his memories left. But I also heard a measure of resilient, even defiant gratitude ... that some emotions, like love ... live even beyond our memory. And even though her uncle may have forgotten much ... including even the members of his extended family ... he nevertheless remembers that they are still bound to each other in love.

I thought of her uncle again when reading this week's passage from Jeremiah. It is one of my favorites ... describing the new covenant ... and God's intention to take the matter of Israel's relationship with God fully into God's own hands:

this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord (Jer. 31:33-34a).

This move arises from both God's heartache at the inability of Israel to keep faith with God ... and God's relentless determination to preserve God's beloved people:

It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt--a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord (v. 32).

This covenant differs from the last. Before God had in effect said, "I'll raise up a people and give them the Torah, the law. It will tell them who I am ... and what I expect ... and they will know me by following these clear guidelines that I am giving them for their own good." God called Moses ... freed the Hebrews from slavery ... led them out into the wilderness to make that covenant ... a clear agreement about who God would be for them and who they would be for God. Moses went up on Mount Sinai, and God said, "Take these two tablets and call me in the morning." But those stone tablets were hard to swallow and the Hebrews were worshipping the golden calf before Moses could even get down the mountain with the tablets of the law.

God was angry, almost ready to obliterate them, and they deserved it. But God re-negotiated again. "All right ... all right. I see we need a way to repair this relationship when you break it, so here is a whole system of sacrifices through which you can turn around and come back and rededicate yourself to me when you break the limits that I have set." But parenting is hard. And it didn't work. God's children wandered away ... decided that they knew best ... worshiped the things they made by hand ... and got themselves into trouble.

By Jeremiah's time, God had bailed them out again and again and again. But this God of incomprehensible love, did not abandon them ... no, this God of incomprehensible love, offered yet another covenant ... different from the others. Perhaps most significantly, because it is brought into existence, ratified, not by a sacrifice or any ritual practice ... but by God's decision to forget ... to forget Israel's sinfulness, betrayal, and infidelity. God did not just pass over, absolve, or forgive this time around ... God also forgot ... erasing even the memory of the breach in their relationship:

for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more (v. 34b).

It sounds like God ... out of love for Israel ... developed amnesia ... selective amnesia we assume ... but amnesia none the less. And, truth be told, this is a slightly uncomfortable thought for me. Memory, you see, is so central to who we are ... which is of course what makes dementia and Alzheimer's so terrifying. If we lose our memory, we wonder, are we really ourselves? If we lose our memory, what do we have left? If you have a family member who has suffered memory loss from disease or injury you know what I'm talking about.

And yet it sounds like the God of Israel ... the One who neither slumbers nor sleeps ... *chose* to forget. What are we to make of this? Is this a metaphor, a dramatic play of words? Has God really forgotten their sins? The whole "golden calf" incident, just forgotten? And the worship of foreign gods ... entirely wiped clean? Can God really forget? And, if so, what else might God have forgotten?

It 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. And yet if I'm totally honest, there are things I wish I *could* forget. Indeed, a number of things. Like, for instance, every minor slight and injury I seem to hold onto ... unsure at times if they were even intended as slights ... and yet unable to let them go. Or some of the painful things I've said over the years ... out of anger or hurt feelings ... to some of the people that I love most in the world. Would it not be wonderful to forget these things ... and in this way start anew?

I sometimes wonder, in fact, if part of Israel's problem at this point in the story is precisely that they can't forget. They can't forget what it's like *not* to trust God. They can't forget what it's like *not* to be so afraid ... of life beyond Egypt ... or the power of a neighboring country, for instance. They can't forget their penchant for running to whatever god or customs their more powerful neighbors held. And, most of all, they can't forget their unrelenting pattern of faithlessness. And not being able to forget these things ... they seemed doomed to repeat them.

And so, God did what Israel could not ... God forgot. In response to their failure ... God refused to recognize it. In response to their infidelity ... God called them faithful. In response to their

sin and brokenness and very real wretchedness ... God's memory couldn't be pushed and prodded to find any recollection. God forgot.

And if God forgot, might we also?

When I was in seminary a professor tried out the following exercise with our class. After talking about this passage and God's insistence on not just forgiving our sins ... but forgetting them as well for the sake of a new and better relationship ... she asked us to call to mind ... and hold onto ... one difficult memory of something we had done that we wished that God would forget ... an unkind word or deed of which we were ashamed, perhaps. Then, she asked us to call to mind ... and hold onto ... one thing we wished we could forget ... some slight or hurt or betrayal or disappointment that continued to prey upon us.

She then invited us to actually imagine holding them in each of our hands and told us to extend our arms and feel the weight of what we were holding. We sat there with our arms extended for quite a long time. Finally, she read this passage about God's intentional forgetting ... and as we heard those words we were asked to let go of the thing we wished God would forget because, indeed, God already has. Then she challenged us to explore in the coming week whether we were able to let the other ... the thing we wished we could forget ... go. She could not demand that of us, of course, but she did encourage us to try ... in order that, by God's grace, we would no longer be held captive to that difficult memory.

I invite you to try this at some point ... in whatever way is most comfortable for you. I know that some hurts have marked us so deeply that I dare not assume they are easy to forget, and I would never want anyone to feel like they have failed for not being able to, so please be gentle with yourself. At the same time, I think we all need to be reminded of God's promise to do what we cannot always easily do ... to forget ... to forget all that keeps us from relationship with God ... so that, in the absence of shameful memories ... we can imagine and live into a new future.

I will always think of my friend's uncle when I read this passage. I know full well that the "forgetting" this passage announces is qualitatively different from the forgetting he experiences. Yet my friend tells me that her uncle now lives, by and large, with a remarkable equanimity, even a tranquility of spirit. This is not to make light of his condition ... or that of anyone suffering a similar illness. I'm sure that his road to this place has been at many points both difficult and painful for him ... and for all those who love him. But it is to recognize, amid the tragedy, something that is occasionally beautiful. He has forgotten most or all of the things that once weighed him down ... and he is now at peace. And that is a rare accomplishment.

Has he forgotten also, however, so much of himself that he no longer really is himself? I'm not sure how anyone would know for sure. I do know, though, that he has not forgotten what it is to love or be loved ... and to the degree that he remembers that ... I would argue ... he remembers the best and most essential part of himself. Further, in these moments of blessed forgetfulness ... knowing that many other moments have not felt blessed ... he finds connection with the God of Jeremiah who also forgets so much ... yet remembers love.

"Tell my family that although I do not remember them I love them." ... "I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more." I don't know how far apart these statements are. Sometimes to me they feel infinitely distant ... at others remarkably close. But I do know that

I'm grateful for a God who will do -- for Israel as well as for you and for me -- what we cannot do for ourselves.

May we pray?

O God our Father and our Mother, both the Bible and our own hearts tell us that we don't deserve the kind of love you have shown us. Thank you for not giving up ... for never giving up ... on finding a way to be with us ... for both forgiving and forgetting ... our sins. Amen.