

May 12: Remind (1 Corinthians 15:1-11) – Pastor Heather McDaniel

Our Scripture today reading comes from the Narrative Lectionary—a year-long collection of readings that help us trace a particular theme throughout the Bible’s big story: the theme of “Love in Action.” In each week’s passage, there’s a compelling action verb embedded in the narrative, which we’re invited to ponder and practice. Of course, we know that *love* is the most important verb of all, and that every action we do is rooted in God’s boundless, active love for us and for all creation. And our ultimate goal as we come to God’s word and let it speak to us is to increase in love towards God and each other, love that’s lived out so that our world can receive and reflect it. Please pray with me before we dive into our text.

God of steadfast mercy and love, thank you that you never forget us or forsake us. Please help us remember the story of what you have done for us and live fully in the freedom you have given us. Please use my words this morning to orient our minds and hearts and selves back towards what’s important. Amen.

Does anybody remember the bestselling book, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*? It was first published in 1986 by Robert Fulghum, who claimed that for most of us, the “elemental notions about humanity” were given to us when we were very young, through simple truths like “share everything,” “play fair,” “say you’re sorry when you hurt someone,” and “hold hands and stick together” when you go out into the world. In other words, we know what’s necessary to live a meaningful life – we just have trouble remembering and living it out.

The Scripture passage we read today is Paul’s version of *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, written to remind the divided and distracted community of Corinth of the simple good news that anchored and united and healed them. In her sermon last week, Pastor Meg shared about how fractured this early church was. Not only was it composed of people from dramatically different cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, but it was situated in a highly partisan society. The Corinthian church community absorbed and lived out the competitive culture of personality politics and performative rivalry that surrounded them, and they lost their focus on what originally transformed and brought them together. Throughout his letter, Paul worked to re-orient them, and as he comes to a close in chapter 15, he once again focuses

the community he so fiercely loves on the core gospel by which they are saved. He engages in the practice of reminding, and calls us to do the same.

Before I go on, I want to linger a little bit on what I just called the practice of reminding, and how it's different from just remembering. There are all kinds of things that we remember without even trying, all through the day, memories triggered by smells or words or snatches of song, and we have little to no control over that kind of remembering. But there are also things we choose to bring to our mind and hold there – not just memories of things that have happened, but thoughts and beliefs and affirmations. And what we choose to bring to our mind and hold there – what we re-mind ourselves of – has a powerful effect on what we do, what we feel, and who we become.

In the Old Testament Scriptures, whenever it says God remembered, it's almost always paired with God's action. When God remembered Noah and all the animals with him on the ark, God made a wind blow over the earth so that the waters dried up. When God remembered Rachel, longing for a child, God opened her womb. And when God saw the Israelites groaning under the heavy weight of slavery, God remembered the covenant with them and called Moses out of the wilderness to lead them to freedom. And the very first thing God commands the Israelites to do after escaping from Egypt is to remember their freedom story by reenacting it every year at the Passover – this corporate, embodied reminding is key to being able to live and act as God's liberated people, rather than as slaves to empire.

About eight years ago, I went through a period of significant anxiety that impacted my life and kept me from sleeping, and I started going to therapy to help me through it. And one of the things I learned from therapy was that the way I interpret and think about a situation has a huge impact on my feelings, my actions and behaviors, and my body. Part of my therapy was learning to identify my thoughts and assumptions and stories about myself and the world and the future, evaluate them, and re-mind myself of beliefs and stories that are true and helpful and hopeful.

And that's the kind of practice of reminding Paul is calling the Corinthians to in this passage. In the midst of the many loud and discordant voices they're getting distracted by, he's recalling them – and himself, as well – to the core truths of the gospel, the good news he first preached to them, which they received, and on which they took their stand. "By this gospel," he wrote, "you

are saved” – you are healed, you are delivered – “if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you.” Paul is re-minding them of the gospel because he knows that holding firmly to this good news is transformative, that it affects their feelings and actions and community. As this chapter unfolds, Paul calls this church – and us – to remember three things: the story of Jesus, remember who we are in light of that story, and remember the future. And that’s what I’ll be reminding us about in this sermon, as well. So if you don’t hear anything new from me today, that’s intentional, because sometimes we need to hear simple words of life and love and hope again and again. We need to be reminded.

Brain science has shown us that we remember things much better – we encode them most deeply – when they are part of a story, particularly a story that has resonance to our own story.

And it is with a story that Paul begins this passage. He reminds the Corinthian church of the story of Jesus, which is the core foundation of the good news that saves us. Not the teachings of Jesus, not a particularly theology or philosophy based on Jesus, but a story – of a real, historical living person who died for our sins according to the Scriptures, was buried, was raised on the third day according the Scriptures, and who appeared to Peter and James and the Twelve and over 500 other real people, many still known by the Corinthian community. Those are the simple bones of a story that is deep and wide and never loses its power, the story of Jesus and his love that we sang about in the hymn today, the story we hunger and thirst to hear because it satisfies our longings as nothing else can do.

Notice how Paul emphasizes twice that the story of Jesus happened “according to the Scriptures” – that it’s the continuation and climax of a story that began long, long ago. The same God who was revealed to Moses as Yahweh, who bared his mighty arm to deliver the Israelites from slavery and defeat the power of empire, who cared for the Israelites with compassion and faithful love, despite their unfaithfulness – that’s the God who walked among us as Jesus, loving and saving and redeeming all people through his life, death, and resurrection.

When we remind ourselves of Jesus’ story, we remember how deeply we are loved, exactly as we are, no matter what. And we also remember that we are free. We are no longer defined by our brokenness, or imprisoned by the shame of what we’ve done or not done, nor are we bound by cords made by others.

We are free to go forward in newness of life, to choose a fresh path that leads to wholeness. And if we believe Jesus died for our sins – not just my individual sins, but our collective sins, our broken systems and the systemic evil that plagues the world, in order to bring redemption to all creation, we can go forward with hope. We are delivered in order to join in God's work of deliverance, bringing justice and transformation in the world around us.

Just like God called the Israelites to retell their freedom story so that they would remember who they were, retelling the story of Jesus reminds us of who we are, and we can see that in this passage as Paul talks about himself in light of the gospel. Paul had a past life that he wasn't proud of. He didn't get to meet or walk with Jesus while Jesus was on earth, like most of the other apostles did, and he was actively engaged in persecuting Jesus-followers and even sentencing them to death. In verse 7, he writes that after the risen Jesus appeared to just about everybody else, he finally appeared to Paul "last of all...as to one abnormally born." The Greek word translated "abnormally born" actually refers to a miscarried or aborted fetus. It's an ugly term, and it might have even been an insult lobbed at Paul by his critics. He goes on to call himself the "least of the apostles," someone who didn't even deserve that vocation. But then he remembers who he has become – gifted and called and emboldened to embody and preach the good news, without shame and without trying to pretend his story of brokenness is any different than it is. "By the grace of God I am what I am," he writes, "and his grace to me was not without effect." Paul's ability to work "harder than all of them" isn't what makes him worthy to be an apostle – instead, it highlights the story of God's grace in his life.

As somebody who discerned God's call to pastoral ministry later in life and went through seminary as one of the outlier older students, I empathize with Paul as he writes about being "last of all" to come to his vocation as apostle. And although my story is unique, I know I'm not alone in comparing myself to others and coming up short, worrying that my age and experience, or my weaknesses and limitations and brokenness, make me less worthwhile or effective in this world as I could have been. But the good news of Jesus's story reminds me of who I am – freed and redeemed, loved and chosen and gifted and empowered, in all my individuality and with all of my backstory. By the grace of God, I am what I am, and his grace to me is not without effect.

And by the grace of God, each one of you is exactly who you are. I want to invite each of you to simply be aware of yourself right now – of your body, exactly as it is in this moment as you sit in your chair; of your story, with all its highs and lows; of your gifts and failures and brokenness and dreams. And I want to remind you that you are completely accepted, as you are, in your full individuality and with your story, that each one of you is chosen and loved and gifted and called. And I want to invite you to say those words of Paul with me from verse 10: “By the grace of God, I am who I am.” [Repeat together.] And his grace to you is not without effect.

The final thing that Paul calls us to in this chapter is to remember the future. That sounds like an oxymoron – to remember something that hasn’t happened yet. But I think that this is what hope is: remembering a good future and then living our lives in alignment with it. Because how we remember the future makes a difference to how we live now.

Many of the Corinthians denied that there would be a future resurrection of the dead, and this belief horrified Paul – “If only for this life we have hope in Christ,” he wrote, “we are of all people most to be pitied” (15:19). The core of the gospel story is that that Jesus died for our sins and was raised on the third day. And because we are invited into this good story in which Jesus defeated death and triumphed over evil, each one of us will be able to share in Jesus’ resurrection after death – in fact, the whole of creation will be freed and delivered and made new. That’s the future that Paul wants us to remember, which will change the way we live now.

Because he remembered a future in which death was not final, Paul could face mortal danger every day and carry on with his work without fear. Because he remembered that the people he preached to and labored with were going to share eternity with him, he didn’t hold back from loving them with all his heart and calling them to love above all else – because love endures forever. Because he remembered the future, Paul could even taunt death – in verse 55, he writes, “Where, O death, is your sting?” He wasn’t implying that death doesn’t hurt or leave us bereft – instead, he was calling us to a holy defiance.

When we remember that life and love and justice will win in the end, we can give ourselves fully to work that seems hopeless, knowing that our labor is not in vain. Like the four mothers I talked about earlier who stood up to Pharaoh, like mothers all over the world right now, we can defy the powers of evil and

war and empire, in the face of overwhelming odds, because we know how the story ends. And when we lose those we love to death, we can mourn with hope, remembering that this is not the end. All will be well.

We are called to the practice and discipline of remembering – but we are a forgetful people. We forget the good story of Jesus, we forget who we are, we forget that we have a good future. The Israelites in Exodus forgot their freedom story so dramatically that they wanted to return to slavery in Egypt!

By myself, I'm going to do a lousy job remembering what gives me life. Not only is my memory faulty, but I go through tough periods in life in which it's just plain hard to bring helpful beliefs and stories to my mind. I get distracted and overwhelmed. I need help. Is that true for anybody else?

That's why we have embodied practices that help us remember, like coming here each Sunday to retell the story together through singing and reading and proclaiming and pondering; living it out each year through the church calendar; and physically entering into the story of Jesus's love for us each time we receive the wine and bread of Communion.

But it's also why we have each other. We are called to remind each other of Jesus' good story, of who we are, and of the future, to hold memory for those who are struggling. We remind each other not just with words of life and love and hope and truth, but by embodying the story as we live it out. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote that the church members themselves were living letters from Christ, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God (2 Corinthians 3:3). Never underestimate how much of a difference you make simply by living lives of faith and hope and love.

But most important, I want to close with this promise and reassurance – in those moments and days and sometimes weeks and months and even years that we forget, or listen to other voices, or can't find and live from our center, God remembers us and loves us and knows who we are, and is always ready to re-mind us and restore us. That's the core of the good news, the foundation of grace that we stand on. I'm going to conclude with this final re-minder of God's fierce maternal love and memory for each of you, from Isaiah 49:15:

“Can a mother forget the baby at her breast
And have no compassion on the child she has borne?

Though she may forget, I will not forget you!
See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.”

You are remembered, and you are deeply loved. Amen.