



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Spiritual Memory

By Rev. Sharon Gracen

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How many of you have ever heard of the Memory Olympics? Until I listened to interview with the author of a book entitled *Moonwalking with Einstein*, I had no idea such competitions existed. The author, journalist Joshua Foer, tells of discovering the US Memory Championships while researching a story. He became so intrigued that he dove into the world of mental athletics and within 18 months, he went from being someone with a very mediocre memory who frequently lost his keys to being the US Champion. The competitions include event like pages from an unknown yearbook shown to contestants for a short time and then given back to them with the photos rearranged and no names. The test is to see how many names they get right. Memorizing the order of a deck of cards is a favorite, along with other random numbers contests. The record for memorizing the value of π stands at 83,431. It boggles the mind.

The trick to all of this is creating distinctive mental images for anything one wants to remember, placing the images in familiar rooms or buildings. Recalling, then, becomes a matter of making your way through those locations, or “memory palaces,” and seeing the things that you put there. This works because humans naturally remember visual images. So as I listened to this interview on the radio, while driving to my meeting, I decided to see if I could meet the challenge of remembering the random items that were being listed by the interviewer. Six days later, I can still remember the horse standing on my bed, the tambourine balanced on the banister, the huge spoon on the bottom stair, the oversized lemon on the dining table, the ghost in my kitchen, etc. It’s really quite simple.

Anyway, there is a connection to all this, and it comes from this idea of “memory palaces” and Jesus’ statement from this morning’s gospel reading that in our “father’s house there are many dwelling places”, or mansions. Like the mnemonic devices I was using, Jesus presents a very visually oriented notion of God’s perspective, telling us that we exist, as separate and distinct beings in the memory of God, each in our own dwelling places within the Mind of God.

This is a potentially significant point in the dynamics of our relationship with God. God remembers his people as a community, but God also remembers each of us, as discrete beings. One of the books I’ve lugged around since seminary is called *The Memory of the Christian People*. The author observes that Judaism and Christianity are “memory religions”, because they both draw on moments in history in which God has entered the human experience and changed its course. For the Jews, the Exodus is that moment. For us Christians, it is the Jesus event. Our respective faiths are organized around the remembering of those events, made present in the Passover and in the Eucharist. The Jewish calendar and the church year are both tools that deepen and enhance the experience of remembering. “The vehicle of Christian hope

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is Christian memory.” Without remembering the mighty deeds and what they mean, we would not know to look toward the time when that meaning is made real on earth.

There is a special kind of remembering that happens in our worship, particularly in the celebration of the Eucharist. It is called anamnesis. The word actually means “un-amnesia” or “unforgetting” which means that it is the deliberate work of the church keeping the story alive. Anamnesis is different from simple remembering; it’s a larger experience in which what we remember becomes real and present in this moment. As the bread is blessed and broken, we are in that moment when Jesus became known to the disciples in Emmaus. As we read of Christ’s betrayal and suffering they become ours and ours becomes his. When we break the bread, we are at the foot of the cross as the broken body it taken down. We become that body. The mystery of the Eucharist is in our remembering and where it takes us as we refuse to forget.

Episcopalians speak of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist which is very different from the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, that idea of the bread and wine physically turning into the actual flesh and blood of Jesus at the moment of consecration. Understanding the Eucharist as a memorial meal, a meal of spiritual remembering, invites us into the mystery. It is no longer something that happened to Jesus, and is presented to us; as we truly remember the story, it enters into the present. As we eat and drink and remember, we become the one, holy body of Christ.

Human memory and awareness are prerequisites to knowing how we relate to God. Remembering is one of those things that happens in the brain and the heart at the same time. Emotion, whether or not we acknowledge it, plays a role in everything that we remember, the stronger the emotion or experience, the more accessible the memory. Emotion colors what we remember and how we remember it. The Passover meal retells the story and those gathered around the Seder table are taken through the emotions of bitterness and anguish, they taste the tears of their enslaved ancestors. The foods that they eat are meant to evoke the emotions of the experience. Emotional experiences connect us to God too, and I think it must be through the expression of our emotions that we enter the many mansions of God’s memory and become so well known to God.

Along with the Memory Olympics this week, I came across an article about the Buddhist teaching of Ten Worlds – ten states of being which begin in the most unevolved state, a kind of hell, a state of suffering and despair in which we experience no freedom. The worlds emerge as one transcends a previous state, through a state of insatiable desire for power and status, through greed and anger, eventually to an understanding of joy and finally culminating in a state of boundless compassion. These may be the Buddhist way of telling the spiritual story, but they also describe the journey that we all take, through the many mansions of God’s memory. Unlike human memory, God’s memory is infinite, but it is nice to know that we each occupy a “memory palace” in the Mind of God, and that God sees and remember our trials as well.

Nothing is trivial to God. At the end of the interview, our US Memory champion Joshua Foer admitted that the skills he had acquired and which he was passing on were not really that

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useful. Not so with God's memory of us. Not only does God's memory of us, each in our distinct dwelling places within God's kingdom, remind us of how precious we are but it gives us a place to rest ourselves, a safe house for our souls, a comforting dwelling place for us to manage our occasional weariness.

Love permeates the many dwelling places of God's house, and the invitation to freedom draws us in. God invites us into a freedom that is more than geographical; it is the freedom of our spirits. Christ has gone ahead of us to prepare the way into the dwelling place of compassion. We will get there by remembering with our hearts and minds the mansions of God's kingdom where each one of us holds a place of equal value in God's memory. And unlike the useless information that we ourselves might accumulate by visually placing different things within the virtual rooms of our houses, the memory of each dwelling place we occupy is precious to God, indeed essential to God's creative presence in the world.

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