

Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd  
Pentecost 26  
November 18, 2018

## **THE FORGETFUL GOD** **Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25**

Every now and then I find myself going into another room and I can't remember why I went there. Does that ever happen to you? Perhaps you climb the stairs of your two-story home and when you arrive on the landing you can't remember what you came for. Or, what about the time you go to Walmart, spend \$50. and when you return home you forgot to purchase the one thing you went there for in the first place.

Some would say this is a phenomenon of the aging process. Others would say it's because we are so used to doing things, we continue doing them at the same pace even though our bodies have slowed down. In other words, our minds are programmed to keep busy.

I believe there could be a third reason. We forget because it really wasn't that important in the first place. We'll simply remember when the time comes. Or, it will just completely fade away because it has no affect on our lives. When folks forget they are embarrassed. It even scares some to think they are losing their minds. On the other hand, forgetting may be a good thing.

In Hebrews, in our Second Reading for today, we hear these words, “I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.” When God forgives, God forgets. God does not forgive conditionally. God forgives completely. The forgiveness of God is total and everlasting. This was the purpose of this passage in Hebrews. The writer, maybe Paul, contrasts the priestly role of Jesus with the priests of the day. The priests repeated the temple ritual of animal sacrifices, over and over. The writer is saying that their work was essentially futile, because it was never finished. On the other hand, Jesus finished his work. His one-time atonement for our sins was enough because the forgiveness of Jesus was totally unconditional.

We find this troubling because we find it difficult to forgive others completely. We will tolerate them and even be nice to them, but completely erase their sins? No way! When it comes to forgiving others, I frequently hear people say, “I can forgive, but I will never forget.” That’s a clever way of saying that forgiveness is conditional. God’s forgiveness, however is unconditional and the only way for us to fully understand that God forgets is to be persons who forget ourselves.

How do we truly forgive and forget? The first way is by accepting God’s unconditional forgiveness for ourselves. People are human and there will be some who just won’t forget. But we don’t have to let the controlling memories of others keep us from moving forward.

One day a seven-year-old boy was riding in the back seat of the car. Suddenly, in a fit of anger, his mother, who was driving, spun around and struck him across the face. Then she yelled at him: “And you! I never wanted you. The only reason I had you was to keep your father. But then he left anyway. I hate you.” That scene branded itself on the boy’s memory. During the years that followed, his mother reinforced her feelings toward him by constantly finding fault with him. Years later, that son told a friend: “I can’t tell you how many times in the ensuing years I have relived that experience. Probably thousands.” Then he added: “But recently I put myself in my mother’s shoes. Here she was, a high school graduate with no money, no job, and a family to support. I realized how lonely and depressed she must have felt. I thought of the anger and the pain that must have been there. And I thought how much I reminded her of the failure of her young hopes. And so, one day I went to visit her and told her that I understood her feelings and that I loved her just the same. She broke down and we wept in each other’s arms for what seemed like hours. It was the beginning of a new life for me, for her, and for us.” (The Forgiving Son from “Putting Forgiveness into Practice” by Doris Donnelly)

When we are willing to forgive others, we are putting into practice the unconditional forgiveness of God. Each time we do that our lives will become more fulfilled and we will be free. And, the negative actions of others in our memories will be erased.

Secondly, God does not want us to give up. In verse 23 it reads, “Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering.” This means God wants us to persevere, to keep trying because forgiveness will ultimately prevail.

In Glasgow, Scotland, a young lady, like a lot of teens today, got tired of home and the restraints of her parents. The daughter rejected her family’s religious lifestyle and said, “I don’t want your God. I give up. I’m leaving!” She left home, deciding to become a woman of the world. Before long, however, she was dejected and unable to find a job, so she took to the streets to sell her body as a prostitute. The years passed by, her father died, her mother grew older, and the daughter became more and more entrenched in her way of life. No contact was made between mother and daughter during these years. The mother, having heard of her daughter’s whereabouts, made her way to the skid-row section of the city in search of her daughter. She stopped at each of the rescue missions with a simple request. “Would you allow me to put up this picture?” It was a picture of the smiling, gray-haired mother with a handwritten message at the bottom: “I love you still.... come home!”

Some months went by, and nothing happened. Then one day the daughter wandered into a rescue mission for a needed meal. She sat absent-mindedly listening to the service, all the while letting her eyes wander over to the bulletin board.

There she saw the picture and thought, could that be my mother? She couldn't wait until the service was over. She stood and went to look. It was her mother, and there were those words, "I love you still...come home!" As she stood in front of the picture, she wept. It was too good to be true.

By this time, it was night, but she was so touched by the message that she started walking home. By the time she arrived it was early in the morning. She was afraid and made her way timidly, not really knowing what to do. As she knocked, the door flew open on its own. She thought someone must have broken into the house. Concerned for her mother's safety, the young woman ran to the bedroom and found her still sleeping. She shook her mother awake and said, "It's me! It's me! I'm home!" The mother couldn't believe her eyes. She wiped her tears and they fell into each other's arms. The daughter said, "I was so worried! The door was open, and I thought someone had broken in." The mother replied gently, "No dear. From the day you left, that door has never been locked." (Chicken Soup for the Mother's Soul, pp. 29-31)

The troubled mother kept her door unlocked. Her daughter, like the prodigal son, was always welcomed home. Her perseverance ultimately resulted in the return of her daughter.

Finally, the text for today reads, "Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds...and encouraging one another."

To be part of the community of faith is to accentuate the positive. In the counseling world they use this technique to encourage clients who lack self-esteem. Troubled individuals stay troubled because no one in their life has praised them for what they do right. All they know is criticism, judgment and guilt trips.

Vinnie was a young man who got into trouble with the law because of drugs. He hung around the wrong crowd but fortunately he was probated to a half-way house. He was assigned to a counselor who was worth her salt. During a counseling session she told him that she had observed him playing basketball. She noticed that he frequently passed the ball to others, so they could make a shot. She said this was symbolic of who he was as a person. He cared for others and wanted others to succeed. This encounter changed Vinnie's life. Never had anyone said something positive to him. It was a decisive moment and it enabled him to go forward with his life.

What Vinnie experienced was a God who forgets sins but remembers good deeds. God does more than forgive, God forgets. Since God is a God of grace, we don't have to let others control us with grudges and the inability to forget. It may take years for reconciliation to happen, but God wants us to be "unwavering" in our faith. The only true way to grasp the nature of God's unconditional forgiveness is to be people who forget, just as God has forgotten.

One more closing thought. Inscribed on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's makeshift prison altar-table was the Greek word 'ep'hapax' meaning "once-for-all." It testifies that Christ's death on the cross was a sacrifice made "once-for-all," and that "all" includes you, me, and the whole world. We have received the bounties of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. We did not ask for it – we received it as a gift. Done! Finished! This is good news for us today as we walk through the ups and downs of daily living and especially in the moments that tempt us to question God's faithfulness.

God is indeed faithful through Christ's death and resurrection. In the cross and empty tomb, we can place all our trust, knowing that, no matter what / no matter what, we are saved by the One who is indeed the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Amen.