

Nov. 7, 2010
Luke 22: 14-19
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
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Remembrance

Sometimes I find remembering doesn't come as easily as it used to. I may walk down the hall to someone else's office and by the time I've gotten there I've forgotten what I was going to say. I've found if I go back to my office where I first had the idea it usually will come back to me, but not always. I've also found it helps to have a sense of humor about the whole thing.

Memory is a tricky thing. It shifts over time and we do often get anxious about our memories as we get older. On WedMD I found this piece of advice: "(a) rule of thumb that's kind of whimsical in a sense but clinicians often use is, if you're worried about [your memory], it's probably not that serious, but if your friends and relatives are worried about it, then it probably is more serious."

It's important to recognize that memory is not strictly a cognitive activity. It is rich and nuanced. Even while we aren't directly thinking about it our bodies remember touch and movement and we soften to the touch of a baby even when so much else is slipping away. Our bodies remember sound and a particular piece of music may touch our emotions and we find ourselves unexpectedly dancing or weeping. And then there is smell – for good or ill. The smell of baking beans and warm blueberry pie will transport me back to my grandmother's kitchen in a deep experience of remembrance.

Memory is central to how we understand ourselves. The memories we have of experiences and people give shape to our lives. Our collections of memories tell our stories. These stories em-body us. They put real flesh and bones on our name. It is why children love to hear stories about when their parents and grandparents were young. It is why older folk wonder what kind of legacy they are leaving. And if we develop a memory illness, which some of us do, we count on friends and family to hold those memories for us, even when we no longer can.

When we die, which we will, we count on the community to hold us in remembrance. And as the years pass and our faces grow dim in the memories of those we leave behind, we trust in the promise we heard from Ecclesiasticus that when even more time has passed and our names are so woven into the fabric of the ancestors that they no longer stand out individually, God still remembers each one of us.

Today we embodied that promise in a ritual of remembrance for those who have died this year. As we honor each person, we remember them. We re-member that person in a deeply evocative way. We claim them again as members of this community, as members of the Body of Christ. We recognize that even in death those in the cloud of witnesses are part of us.

In his book *In Memoriam*, Henri Nouwen, a spiritual teacher of the 20th century, speaks of this reality as he reflects on his own mother's death. In the introduction the book is described (by Michael O'Laughlin) as a meditative tableau of "an encounter with death, a prayer to God, and a celebration of love and life." At the conclusion of the book, Nouwen writes "I know that I must be patient and allow her who taught me so much by her life to teach me even more by her death."

Death is a life altering and poignant teacher for those of us still living. Much of what we learn about the deep mysteries of life comes through our engagement with death and much of what we learn about death comes through our celebration of life. Paul put it this way, "Whether we live or whether we die, we belong to Christ." (Romans 14:8) In other words we are always re-membered. We are always members of the Body of Christ - in life and in death.

And so as we come to the communion table today we do so bound one to another through Christ. We come remembering Jesus and the life and love he shared with those he encountered. We accept the invitation to fully abide in remembrance with Christ – to recognize that we are re-membered in the Body of Christ.

As we do so we re-member those who have gone before us.

We re-member those who have been disenfranchised from the church, trusting the promise that God seeks out even one lost lamb and knowing that when one part of the body is hurting the whole body is not whole.

We re-member those who are poor and hungry and suffering injustice, trusting that Christ's food is for both soul and body, knowing that God calls us to care for our neighbors.

We remember that this meal is ultimately a mystery of life and death that feeds us over and over again. A little girl to whom I served communion over twenty-five years ago made this very clear to me. In that church, people came forward for communion by intinction on Easter Sunday. This girl (about 6-7), who was visiting her grandparents, came down the aisle with a glorious smile and delighted in receiving the gifts of God. Then on the way out of church she stuck out her hand saying, "Thanks the food was great!" Indeed the food is great, and that's worth remembering.