

Ash Wednesday Reflection: 2/06/08
By Rev. JF Hudson at Pilgrim Church

“Forgiving and Forgetting”

“For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

--Matthew 6:13-15

Are you good at remembering things, people, places? Or is your memory not so great, maybe slipping a bit as you get older? Me—I seem to remember that which should be forgotten, and often forget that which should be remembered. So my brain can tell me in a heartbeat the name of the first American to die in the Revolutionary War...Crispus Attucks, of course! Or the Capitol of North Dakota? Pierre...no, Bismark! Caught you. But ask me--the date of my Mom's birthday (some time late in May), or the name of a church member I've seen a dozen times (what is her name?!) or my ATM password...I often forget. It's a quirk of life: humans too often remember what we really should forget, and we too often forget that which we want and need to remember.

The poet Billy Collins wrote of this in his poem, **“Forgetfulness”**

“The name of the author is the first to go
followed obediently by the title, the plot,
the heartbreaking conclusion, the entire novel
which suddenly becomes one you have never read,
never even heard of,
as if, one by one, the memories you used to harbor
decided to retire to the southern hemisphere of the brain,
to a little fishing village where there are no phones.
Long ago you kissed the names of the nine Muses goodbye
and watched the quadratic equation pack its bag,
and even now as you memorize the order of the planets,
something else is slipping away, a state flower perhaps,
the address of an uncle, the capital of Paraguay.
Whatever it is you are struggling to remember,
it is not poised on the tip of your tongue,
not even lurking in some obscure corner of your spleen.
It has floated away down a dark mythological river
whose name begins with an L as far as you can recall,
well on your own way to oblivion where you will join those
who have even forgotten how to swim and how to ride a bicycle.
No wonder you rise in the middle of the night
to look up the date of a famous battle in a book on war.
No wonder the moon in the window seems to have drifted
out of a love poem that you used to know by heart.”

Remembering and forgetting: if only humans could remember more our love poems and the sweetness of those words and the joy of knowing another's love, and forget the words of anger that we have spoken or that others have spoken to us. But instead too often, the human thing to do is to remember that which God knows we need to forget—our sins, our faults, our shortcomings, our screw ups, our grudges, our messy humanity—and then most tragically forget our essential goodness, our worthiness as heirs of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, our wholeness as children of God.

Remembering and forgetting; forgiving and forgetting; being forgiven and letting go: on this Ash Wednesday I think our task is clear. We need to remember less and forget more all the ways we have hurt others, hurt ourselves, left things undone, been hurt, struggled with addictions or compulsions, seen relationships break up into a million piecesand we need to remember the truth that each of us is a beautiful child of God, is loved by our God unconditionally, a God who in the moment we confess, confess, and turn back, God forgets about our sins, just blots them out, lets them go.

To paraphrase that Lord's prayer: *"For if you forgive and then forget how others have sinned against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive and forget your sins; but if you do not forgive and forget the ways a brother or sister hurt you, neither will your Father forgive and forget your trespasses."*

The miracle is God suffers from amnesia of sorts when it comes to human sin—when we go to God, when we go to a neighbor, and say, "I am sorry; please forgive me" God lets it go, right away, fully. It's gone—forgotten. But you, me? Can we forgive and forget, be forgiven and forgotten?

Too often we hang on to sins like a dead weight we just cannot discard, bad memories we just cannot shake. What are you remembering tonight that you need to jettison, to send away, to exorcise, to forget?

The problem is not that we sin: to be human is to be hard-wired for mistakes. It is in our bones, our genes, our spiritual DNA. We cannot escape it. Only God is perfect. But still we crucify ourselves for far too much. We continue to crucify others for the wrongs done to us.

So here is God in Jesus tonight, watching us lug around all this tired old baggage, this left over spiritual junk we insist upon dragging behind us.

Jesus says, "Come unto me all you that are weary and I will give you rest." Let it go. Let your sins go. Let's others' sins go too. Fess up. Own up. Don't continue to remember this "badness" because God only remembers the goodness.

So like Jesus, we can go into our wildernesses, our dark and scary places, the wildness of our humanity and trust that when we give over to Jesus all our stuff, he takes it on his shoulders, he climbs up on the cross and he redeems it all somehow, he washes it clean, he washes it away. He forgets.

In the lifeless ashes look and see all our transgressions reduced to mere dust, through Christ. In healing hands we feel the touch of the One who seeks to mend all of our broken hearts, bodies and dreams.

To forgive and to forget. Amen.