

### “OUR CONVENIENT MEMORY”

I remember a visit I made to an inactive church member in my first church many years ago. I was asked by another member to visit a woman who had not been in church for many years and this person thought she might come back if the “new” minister called upon her. I called, set up an appointment and went to visit. After a few minutes of pleasantries we got right down to it. Twenty years before there had been a messy issue in the public schools where people took sides for and against a teacher who was eventually fired. This battle was also lived out in this small white framed church I was then serving. She said to me, “I will never set foot in that church again as long as so and so is still alive. Come back and see me when that sob is in the ground.” It was amazing how vivid her memory was from an incident that happened so long ago. The reason of course was that she chose to remember the incident so vividly and who knows whether her memory was accurate or not?

It is easy to pick on someone like that, but we all have convenient memories. We remember what we want to and choose not to remember what we don’t want to. It can work both ways. For this woman her memory allowed her to nurse a grudge for over twenty years. For many of us we do the opposite---we remember things rosier than they actually were. We might remember the house we grew up in as a huge wonderful place, but when we visit years later it looks cramped and rather dumpy. I have been doing funeral services for a long time and it is interesting what people choose to remember at a memorial service. I wonder how many truly mediocre people have been elected to sainthood by our convenient memories. Nowhere is this memory thing more prominent than in marriage---Sharlene never remembers what I tell her.

This can be true of our collective memories as well. This morning’s lesson in Luke will serve as a wake up call to what we might have collectively forgotten. In this familiar passage and as we know familiarity often breeds contempt, Jesus has returned to his hometown. He is chosen to read in the synagogue and chooses a passage from the prophet Isaiah: “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.*” Then Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. Then he said to them, “*Today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*” The language here is precise: “*this scripture has been fulfilled.*” Jesus does not say that this scripture has been replaced or that the new will succeed the old. It is fulfilled.

Our convenient collective memory has been encouraged by the churches doctrine of exclusivity. For hundreds of years the Christian church has taught and preached that Christianity has superseded Judaism. I remember a woman in the church I was serving while in seminary who had a hairy fit when I suggested that Jesus was a Jew. “Jesus was a Christian,” she boldly and wrongly asserted. Fred Craddock in his commentary on Luke writes, “It is important first of all to allow the passage to remind us of that which Luke never tires of telling: all that Jesus says and does is within the bosom of Judaism. By his faithfulness, Jesus affirms the Sabbath, the Scriptures, and the synagogue.”

The verses just beyond what we heard this morning in Luke are fascinating. The people who knew this hometown boy suddenly turn on him. They want to see a demonstration of the extraordinary works that had been performed in Capernaum which prompts Jesus to say to them, “*No prophet is accepted in his own country.*” Familiarity is a problem, but it is more than that. They greatly resent that Jesus performed those works in Capernaum which was known to have a heavily non-Jewish population. Jesus defends his ministry to outsiders by offering two Old Testament stories, one about Elijah another about Elisha, both which point to God’s favor on non-Jews. That those two stories are so familiar to them perhaps accounts for their response, for the intensity of their anger toward Jesus. Again Craddock writes, “Anger and violence are the last defense of those who are made to face the truth of their own tradition which they have long defended and embraced. Learning what we already know is often painfully difficult.” I love that phrase---learning what we already know can still be painfully difficult.

In Luke their anger leads to violence. They decide in a mob action to kill him right there and then; take away any chance of his infecting the minds of others. They are going to try to throw him off a cliff. Hurling someone against the rocks was the same as stoning someone to death. This was no official action but the result

of an unruly mob. It is foreshadowing not only of the trial and death of Jesus but also the fate of many of his followers. If it foreshadows Israel's rejection of Jesus and the taking of the message to the Gentiles, then it is important to notice that Jesus does not go elsewhere because he is rejected; he is rejected because he goes elsewhere. What goes around comes around. Jesus goes to the Gentiles to be inclusive of peoples who have been excluded and he is rejected. Then for centuries Christians have done the same thing to the Jews and all other religious communities for that matter.

Rev. Bailey Smith, formerly president of the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Protestant body in the United States, was quoted as saying, "I'm telling you, all other gods besides Jehovah and his son Jesus Christ are strange gods. It's interesting to me...how you have a Protestant to pray, and a Catholic to pray, and then you have a Jew to pray. With all due respect to those dear people, my friends, God Almighty does not hear the prayer of a Jew. For how in the world can God hear the prayer of a man who says that Jesus Christ is not the true Messiah? It is blasphemous. It may be politically expedient...because no one can pray unless he prays through the name of Jesus Christ. It is not Jesus among many. It is Jesus and Jesus only. It is Christ only. There is no competition for Jesus Christ." (*The Good Book*, Peter Gomes, p. 105) It must be really comforting to know the mind of God so completely.

Peter Gomes the chaplain at Harvard University in his *The Good Book* argues that there is a great deal of danger in this kind of hysterical exclusivity. He champions a radically inclusive gospel based on the writings of Paul. He writes, "Paul's argument is that the cross of Jesus is to Gentiles what the Torah is to Jews, and that both are means to salvation and righteousness. In other words, Jews need not become Christian to obtain the promises---in the Torah they already have the promises as Jews....What the Jew now has and has never lost is, according to Paul, now also available to the Gentiles, to whom he is an apostle. Contrary to popular perception, Paul never argues in Romans that the Gentile church has displaced Israel, nor does he argue that Jews must embrace Christ." (Ibid., pp. 116-7) That just makes so much sense to me and that argument can be carried to other means by which God is revealed in different ways to different cultures and peoples.

I think Paul would be appalled at Rev. Bailey Smith or with anyone else who said that the prayers of a Jew did not reach the ears of God. It is unbiblical nonsense and we know the power of religious zealotry in new and terrifying ways in recent history. I firmly believe that God is constantly trying to break through our provincialism, just as God was trying to break through the provincialism in Jesus' home town of Nazareth. This thinking is not trendy or politically correct, but solidly biblical.

I cut out an article from USA Today on Monday written by Rabbi Gerald Zelizer about his experience with Martin Luther King, Jr. He was struck by the breadth of King's circle which included other faith perspectives and those who were thoroughly secular. He cites that it was remarkable that his words and actions united all people, regardless of race, gender or religion. Let me read the last paragraph of his article: "Some are sure that the gospel brings prosperity---health and wealth. Others proclaim that God's will is transmitted exclusively from their pulpit. Most give no quarter to those whom they regard as secular or faithless...King's words still resonate: "All too often I have seen religious leaders stand amid the social injustices that pervade our society, mouthing pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. All too often the religious community has been a taillight instead of a headlight."

The people of Nazareth who first greeted Jesus with "Amen!" finally yelled "Kill him!" because he painfully reminded them of what they already knew---namely that God is free, alive, gracious beyond the bounds of our willingness to know. The worshippers at Nazareth knew that God had blessed an undeserving outsider through Elijah's ministry and they knew that God had cured a Syrian terrorist through Elisha. But it was more than they wanted to be reminded of---they did not come to the synagogue to be reminded that God refused to play by their rules and might well refuse to play by their rules again. So what can they do but kill him. They failed this time, but would get him later. The same was true of King---they had to kill him because his message was just too painful.

Listen again to the words of Paul: "*For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body---Jews and Greeks, slaves or free---we were all made to drink of one Spirit.*" That doesn't sound like an exclusive message to me. Let's see if we can remember it!