



'Heart of Faith'

Reformation Sunday
8:30 & 10:45 am, October 30, 2016
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

[Jeremiah 31:31-34](#); [Romans 3:19-28](#); [John 8:31-36](#)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Hyperthymestic syndrome. Ever heard of it? If you had that syndrome, you'd remember the very day you were diagnosed with it. It is a condition in which a person can remember almost every day of their life. Several years ago, the magazine *National Geographic* had a fascinating article on memory, and detailed the story of a woman who suffers from this syndrome. Known only by her initials, AJ can recall nearly every day since she was about 11. She can remember the day and time when a boy she had a crush on called her on the telephone: 12:34 pm on Sunday, August 3, 1986. She can remember the specific episode of the sit-com *Murphy Brown* that was aired on December 12, 1988. She remembers both the important and the mundane, the global and the personal. She admits it's become a kind of compulsion. AJ says, "When I'm blow drying my hair in the morning, I'll think of whatever day it is. And to pass the time, I'll start mulling over in my mind that day in the last twenty-something years. Like flipping through a Rolodex." (For those in a younger generation, a Rolodex was a handy way to file little bits of information about people—their names/addresses and business cards. On a wheel you could spin, the Rolodex was something you could flip through to find the name of the person you wanted to contact.)

When you and I struggle to recall where we put the car keys, or the name of the person sitting behind us at worship, we might be envious of AJ's remarkable ability to remember everything. But AJ would not wish this ability on anyone. She said, "I remember the good, which is very comforting. But I also remember the bad. I remember every bad choice. And I really don't give myself a break...there are all these forks in the road, moments you have to make a choice, and then it's ten years later and I'm still beating myself up over them. I don't forgive myself for a lot of things...." Well, you and I might not suffer from *hyperthymestic syndrome*, but you and I can certainly recall our mistakes, our bad choices, the wrongs we have done. Some of those memories are incredibly sharp and clear in our minds. Can you recall something that you did, say, ten years ago, that still pains, shames, or embarrasses you?

Perhaps we hoped we had buried them away where we didn't need to confront them. But turns out they are more apt to be like those Halloween decorations we see in people's front yards. You know the ones I am referring to—they probably come in several pieces, with a skull, a bony hand here, a tibia and fibula there—the skeleton that looks like it is arising out of the ground. That's what our memories are like. We'd prefer to forget

some of the things we've done, but it's funny how memory works—those things from the past occasionally **do** haunt us.

Which brings us to Paul's words to the Roman Christians in our reading today: "...through the law comes the knowledge of sin." In other words, Paul says the law serves as a memory cue to us that we haven't followed the law. When Paul refers to the law, this is what he means: The Lord God gave the people of Israel a set of rules for holy living, a way to maintain an ongoing relationship with God and with their neighbors in faithful community. This law included the Ten Commandments, and it let the people know what their part in this relationship was to be. There were rules regarding all daily aspects of life. Rules for justice, for purity, for faithful worship. The people of Israel were to obey these laws in order to be right with God. Only now, post-Jesus, Paul says there is a new function for the law, a rather novel way for the law to work. He says it discloses sin. It brings sin to the light. Much like that memory of a wrong we did years ago that haunts us still. The law, Paul says, silences us, as we realize that we are, in fact, accountable to God for all our words and deeds. And Paul further says that no human being can justify themselves before God through the law or make themselves right with God through the law...because we cannot ever fully obey the Law.

Which could leave you and me with an image of the Lord God sitting before some huge Rolodex that lists our particular name and every occasion when we failed, when we did wrong, when we didn't keep up our part of this relationship with God. There's God the almighty judge, just flipping through the Rolodex all the time and remembering.

But that image of God is **NOT** where Paul leaves us. Neither does Jeremiah in our Old Testament lesson. No, the scripture that we hear today clears the air and gives us a **new** memory cue to hold onto. Ok, so we are imagining God with this huge Rolodex, and on it are listed all the times when you and I have failed to be God's people. And then? Well, wonder of wonders, God rips out every card from that Rolodex, tossing away those cards right and left. "I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more," declares God through his prophet Jeremiah. In that Old Testament passage, we discover God knows the covenant, this relationship, cannot be kept by God's people, for they fail and falter all the time. So God says he will start anew. God will create a new covenant, a new way of having a relationship with the children God has made and loves. This new covenant won't be like the old one, where the law is written on stone tablets that people recite and commit to memory. It won't be written on something exterior to the people because, after all, the people will forget or ignore or neglect. Rather, the Lord God will take his law, and then write it on their hearts, on the interiors of God's people. So they will remember what it means to be the holy people of God, and they will remember what life is like as they love and obey God, and serve and care for their neighbor. It will become as natural to them as breathing. And the final important piece to all this, as Jeremiah prophesies, is that the Lord God will take the past and toss it away and it will be no more. God's great heart of faith will re-create his relationship with his children, and keep that relationship going.

Of course, Jeremiah couldn't predict just how radical this new covenant would turn out to be, and he didn't know when it was going to happen. In fact, years would pass

before there would be any evidence of any sort in Israel that the interiors of the people had been changed at all. Ultimately, it would be the Lord God and **his** righteousness, **his** faithfulness, **his** loving heart, that would have to cover both sides of the covenant. It would take the person of Jesus. God sent his Son to our world as his way of making the covenant work. For Jesus Christ loved and obeyed God the Father. That was as natural to him as breathing—that love and obedience simply welled up from his interior heart of faith. Jesus lived out the holiness of God in human form.

And Jesus Christ also loved the people God made, and that was as natural to Jesus as breathing—that love for God's children everywhere simply welled up from Jesus' interior heart of faith. And so it was that Jesus died for them. Died for you and me. Poured out his blood and poured out his last breath, taking all our sin on himself, putting all our sin to death, ripping every single card from the Rolodex for all time.

"I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more." God's promise here, made real through Jesus, stands in bold relief against all the memories we dredge up about ourselves—those sins we committed that still haunt us, those bad choices we've done that have bred unfortunate consequences, and all the events in our lives we have attempted to rationalize and justify. As well, God's promise here, made real through Jesus, stands in bold relief against all our fears in the present and our uncertainty about the future.

We began this worship with a corporate confession—not so that God could rub our noses in the wrongs we have done. No. It's so God through his gift of his Son can take away those wrongs for good.

And then the Lord God will take our hearts, now clean, now open again to the nourishment of his love, and will fill that space where once sin resided. He will write that love on our hearts, and thus change every direction and substance of our lives. That is the gift God gives to his people. And, ultimately, **that** is what we are to remember. **AMEN.**

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