

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 1, 2021

“Forgetting to Remember” (Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15; John 6:24-35)

Our texts for today speak a lot about bread, a subject I’m sure many of us can sink our teeth into. What is more satisfying to our taste buds than a fresh-baked roll right out of the oven? Susan and I rarely eat bread with our meals at home – primarily, because we don’t need the extra carbs – but when I was growing up, there was always bread on our table. Even though the menu changed from night to night, the one thing I could always count on is that there would be biscuits for supper. It was the one constant thing from day to day.

That’s how it was with the children of Israel and the people during Jesus’ day. Bread was the base of their food pyramid; it was the heart of their diet, something they ate every day. Bread could easily have been equated with life itself. That’s how important it was in the ancient Near Eastern world.

Evidently, there had been plenty of bread down in Egypt when the children of Israel were in captivity. Pharaoh’s oven must have provided everything the children of Israel needed – except, of course, their freedom. So they cried out to God because of their oppression. God heard their cries, delivered them through the Red Sea, and promised them a new land. But as they began their journey through the wilderness, they quickly determined that they didn’t like the direction their lives were taking. They were hot; they were tired; they had to live with makeshift shelter; they were frustrated; and they were hungry. As they looked around at the barrenness which stretched as far as the eye could see – they became fearful...and then angry.

Like us, when we reminisce about the “good old days”, the children of Israel, when they thought about their time in Egypt, tended to eliminate the negative and accentuate the positive. They forgot about the oppression, the long work hours, the hard labor, the beatings at the hands of their taskmasters. What they could remember was that they “sat by the fleshpots and ate their fill of bread.” So they complained to Moses that he had brought them into the wilderness to kill them with hunger. If they had only stayed put, they would have been fat and happy.

They really didn’t have very long memories, did they? They had completely forgotten the power God had demonstrated in bringing about their release. Didn’t they understand that, after all God had done to rescue them, that he would take care of them now? Apparently not. All the plagues God had rained down on the Egyptians and the pushing back of the Red Sea waters were distant memories. They wanted to see another sign – another miracle. They wanted some assurance that God was still there and this manifested itself in their complaints about hunger.

We’re often the same way, aren’t we? When trouble comes or life gets challenging, all we tend to see is the barrenness of the wilderness surrounding us. We become so focused on the problem at hand and how bad that problem makes us feel, we forget the many blessings God has showered upon us. We forget that God has the power to bring us through this particular wilderness – and has, in fact, brought us through the wilderness before.

Yes, we have short memories. I remember a time in my own life. When Susan was pregnant with Betsy, I came home one day for lunch. Ben, who was 3 ½, and Katie, who had just turned

two, were in the back yard playing. When we realized we couldn't hear them we went to check on them – only to find them missing. We called to their names for several minutes...with no response. Finally, I heard the sound of their voices coming from my cousin's back yard. I couldn't see through the growth of trees, but I knew the pool they both enjoyed was in that direction. As quickly as my legs would carry me, I raced to the pool to find Katie clinging onto its side. She had jumped in, or fallen in, or had been pushed in; we're still not sure. She had not yet learned to swim, but had somehow made it to the edge and was waiting to be rescued. Greatly relieved, I pulled her out and carried her home. I knew our lives could have changed forever that day, but God had performed a miracle and her life had been spared.

For weeks, during my daily prayers, I thanked God for his goodness in saving Katie. Then, one day, I forgot to include that petition. Life had returned to its normal routine and another challenge had surfaced. As I petitioned God to help me deal with something different, I had completely forgotten the miracle at the pool and how God had saved my child. And when I remembered that I had forgotten, I felt ashamed. Asking for God's power and presence TODAY, I'd forgotten how he had revealed his power and presence YESTERDAY. Had I only remembered what God had done in the past, I would have had strength for the present and hope for tomorrow.

Yes, we have short memories, but God doesn't hold that against us. Look at what he did in the Exodus passage. The people were complaining and grumbling, but God didn't get angry and say, *Well, I'll just show them.* Instead God said to Moses, *I am going to rain down bread from heaven...At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread.* And it happened just as the Lord promised. In the evening quails came and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew. When the dew lifted, a fine, flaky substance they called "manna" was available for them to gather and eat.

Even when God's people were forgetful, even when they complained, even when they wanted God to prove himself, God never abandoned them. He was always present to guide them, to provide for their needs, and to care for them. That's God's nature.

In the gospel text, the people are once again looking for a sign. Some who had been in the crowd when Jesus performed the miraculous feeding later track him down in Capernaum. When they find him, Jesus says, *You are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.* In other words: *You people have seen a wonderful thing. You have seen how God's grace enabled a crowd to be fed. Your thoughts should be turned to God who did this great thing, but instead, all you are thinking about is bread for your stomachs.*

Jesus points out that these Jews are interested only in physical satisfaction. Having received an unexpectedly free and lavish meal, they want more. Jesus is saying, *Don't forget to remember that there are other hunger that can be satisfied only by me.* This is a message we all need to hear. There is the hunger for truth, and in Jesus alone, there is the truth of God. There is the hunger for life and in him, life is more abundant. There is the hunger for love and in him alone is the love that outlasts sin and death. Christ alone can satisfy the hunger of the human heart and soul.

Jesus tells them – and us – to work *not* for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which only he can give. Immediately, they want to know how they can get it. *What must we do to perform the works of God?* They are thinking like so many of us; that we must do something in order to get something. But Jesus tells them they don't have to do anything. The work they want to do for this bread is work God has already done. *All you need to do is believe*, Jesus tells them. *Just believe that I am the life-sustaining bread God has sent into the world. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.*

This same promise is extended to you and me, as well. This morning as we receive the bread and wine of communion – Christ's precious body and blood – let us not forget to remember the gifts given to us in this holy meal, namely life, salvation and the forgiveness of sins. And above all, let us not forget to remember the sacrifice that was made that we might receive these gifts *freely* from God's amazing grace. Let us today and always take the time to remember all that God has done for us through the saving love of Christ and all that he promises yet to do.

When we forget to remember, life can be more difficult than it has to. But when we reflect on the displays of God's power in the past, we will be comforted in the present and look confidently into the future. Praise be to God who was and is and is to come. Amen.