

## "I Forgot"

1 Kings 18:20-21, 26, 36-39

Galatians 1:1-12

Recently I made an appointment to meet one of my pastor friends for breakfast. Distracted by other requests and duties I didn't take time to look at the calendar. I simply forgot. Later in the morning, going about my day, unaware of my faux pas, I remembered. Quickly I picked up the phone and began apologizing profusely.

Men are known for forgetting their wives anniversaries and birthdays. I haven't heard that it goes the other way very often.

Today is Memorial Day. We remember. It is on the calendar so that we don't forget. We honor those who have served our country, reflect upon their sacrifice and express gratitude.

It is easy to forget. The Israelites were told by Moses; "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart, Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates" (Deuteronomy 6:5-9). Throughout the Old Testament God ordained festivals such as Passover, Pentecost, Yom Kippur, and others to remind the people not to forget. We do the same.

I've watched people write phone numbers and dates on their hands to remember. Perhaps I would have remembered my appointment if I had written it on my hand.

Paul tells the Galatians that "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel..." (Galatians 1:6).

Elijah asks the Israelites, "How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him" (1 Kings 18:21).

Two illustrations are presented for our reflection, one from Paul and one from Elijah. Both ask us to think about our understanding of God's character and how God works in our lives and world. We then ask, "what will be my response?"

God may be a disturber of our peace. We can be much like Paul's description of the Corinthians who "measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise" (2 Corinthians 10:12). Elijah challenges the people to choose what God they will live by and allow to define their lives. Will it be Baal? Will it be the Covenant God of Israel? Or might it simply be ourselves? The gods of our culture, the gods of the cults, in our culture the god of self, and the gods of competing religions all vie for our attention and loyalty.

The attics of our homes are filled with deferred decisions. I possess emotional attachments to many worn out objects which I cannot bring myself to discard. So it may be with competing loyalties of gods and ideas in the marketplace. We go limping about with different opinions.

However, isn't it the people who are of decisive mind we are more likely to follow? It is a strong, decisive leader who can bring order to a demoralized situation and rally us to change our circumstance. It may be a Hitler or a Martin Luther King, Jr. We do need to be discerning in who we follow.

It is said of William Pitt that five minutes with him in conversation left a person more focused and resolute. As one person observes, "Strength of character is developed by clinching our convictions with decisive action...And our moral foundations are undermined by deferring decisions" (Interpreters Bible, p.157).

Elijah sees the circumstances of the people as a matter of spiritual life or death. And so he pits himself against the 450 prophets of Baal. Joshua, a resolute leader with strong faith in God's power and working, challenges the people to be steadfast and hold to the Covenant God gave through Moses so they won't turn to the left or right and become mixed with the nations and their gods. "One of you puts to flight a thousand, since it is the Lord your God who fights for you. Be very careful, therefore, to love the Lord your God" (Joshua 23:19-11).

Elijah builds an altar without fire and challenges the Baal prophets to place their sacrifice on the altar, saying, "The god who answers by fire is indeed God". Placing the bull on the altar the Baal priests cry, "O Baal, answer us! But there was no voice, and no answer. They limped about the altar that they had made".

He then rebuilds the altar of the Lord that had been thrown down. Before it he prays, "O, Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your bidding. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back".

The fire of the Lord comes, consuming the burnt offering, wood, stones, and the dust, and even licked up the water that was in the trench. The people fall on their faces, saying, "The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God".

Paul speaks as an Elijah to the Galatians who are accusing him of undermining the Law of Moses and misrepresenting God. Paul is livid as he watches the Galatians turn from the grace and freedom he preaches that we have in Christ. Grace is being turned into ungrace.

Paul's response, instructive to us, is a statement, not an argument. Salvation is not dependent on our ability to keep the law or rituals of religion and be won by our own unaided efforts. It is our response to the grace offered by God to us through Christ. "For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ".

I can identify with a story of a person who decided to become a minister. He was asked when he had come to that decision. He replied that his decision came after hearing a sermon. He was asked who the preacher was who effected that decision. His answered, "I do not know the preachers name; but I know that God spoke to me that day" (Barclay, Galatians, p.7).

The gospel informs us that we do not achieve a life. We receive a life. Paul is saying that if religion is about fulfilling a mass of rules and regulations, it is, at least theoretically, possible to satisfy its demands. I can then achieve a life of salvation through self-effort.

To those who teach this way of self-effort salvation Paul is clear. This is a "gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you...let that one be accursed". In contrast, Paul lifts up the Cross and says "This is how God loves you". Religion is not a matter of satisfying the claims of the law with its strict and statutory limits. It is about satisfying the claims of love. The question of what to do in a particular situation is not legally determined. The question is simply, "how does Jesus call me to love?" Love is the fulfillment of the law. Remember that Jesus says, "Love one another as I have loved you" (John 14:34-5). The Great Commandment follows the same track; "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:29-31).

Everything is grounded in the grace of Christ and his call upon our lives. This calling and response to the grace of Christ Paul says is true freedom. He would agree with C.S. Lewis who writes, "The more we get what we now call 'ourselves' out of the way and let Him take us over, the more truly ourselves we become" (Guinness, 'The Call', p.25).

Pastor Gordon MacDonald noted that "the world can do anything the church can do except one thing: it cannot show grace". Jesus did not let an institution or anything else interfere with his love for people. He engaged a Samaritan woman, a woman caught in adultery, touched lepers, ate with a Pharisee, befriended tax collectors. Loving the person always transcended the category or the label (Yancey, 'Grace Notes', p.356)

Paul knew the transforming power of that grace and was not going to allow anybody to pervert it. Good things come by grace, not our own efforts. We love because we are loved. "Grace, like water, descends to the lowest part" (Yancey, p, 307). The one catch to grace, St. Augustine says, is that "God gives where He finds empty hands". We have to be open.

How we understand who God is and how God works defines how we think and live. It is the power of love experienced as grace which transforms us, informing how we are to love others. That is why we embrace the immigrant among us, help our new neighbors find a voice at the table, commit to covenant with our partner congregation in Cuba, join our Mission Co-Workers in ministry throughout the world, and find ways to follow Christ in showing grace and love to those with different sexual orientations and others marginalized by society, even our enemies. This is what Christ does. He stretches our comfort zones as he calls us to be merciful as God is merciful.

We serve as a result of grace, not to earn it. Paul tells us not to forget that reality.

What we have to offer the world is our experience of the transforming presence of God's grace working in our lives and community. It is the same gospel Paul received "through a revelation of Jesus Christ".

I leave us with what I believe is an example of that grace at work when the church is at its best. Former Senator Sam Nunn says that the Cold War ended "not in a nuclear inferno, but in a blaze of candles in the churches of Eastern Europe". As with the hiddenness of Christ's grace working, not in the fire of Elijah's offering before the Baals, but in the still small voice, candlelight processions in East Germany did not play well on the evening news. However, the world was changed by this act of the churches.

Yancey tells us that "First a few hundred, then a thousand, then thirty thousand, fifty thousand, and finally five hundred thousand—nearly the entire population of the city—turned out in Leipzig for candlelight vigils. After a prayer meeting at St. Nikolai Church, the peaceful protesters would march through the dark streets, singing hymns. Police and soldiers with all their weapons seemed powerless against such a force.

Ultimately, on the night a similar march in East Berlin attracted one million protestors, the hated Berlin Wall came tumbling down without a shot being fired. A huge banner appeared across a Leipzig street: We thank you, church (Yancey, p.309).

Let us not forget.