

## Using Christian Memory To Inform And Influence Our Present And Future – Josiah Mohr

Jeremiah 2:4-13; Psalm 81:1, 10-16; Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14

There are few people I have met that are more invested in the lives of their family than my grandmother. When you mention even the slightest need, she is always far more generous than her finances can afford. When you bring up any amount of responsibility while visiting her, be it is going to bed or even fixing a meal at a decent time, she will cordially tell you, “You’re on vacation! You don’t need to be responsible—just be present.” And when you tell her stories of what you are doing in life, she gets this unforgettable gleam in her eyes, irradiating excitement and pride for her family. My love and admiration for this woman of God cannot be understated, but these fond memories and qualities of her personality just aren’t the same anymore. You see, she now suffers from a form of dementia that all too often causes her to be confused long before you could even get to the topic of finances. It buries her deep in worry and anxiety with even the simplest of responsibilities. And it prevents her from remembering quite exactly who you are and what activities you are doing.

Dementia, at its core, is an inability to process, perceive, or retrieve appropriate and pertinent information. It is an affliction that impacts millions of individuals, but I would propose that there is also the existence of communal dementia, affecting many communities in American culture today; and the Church is not immune to this disease. I believe the Church in America is in a crisis of dementia if you will, that is causing us, like my grandmother, to be confused about how to respond to those in need, to have deep anxieties about what direction to go and what we can control, and to forget how to embrace and embody our identity in Christ.

The identification of this dementia in the Christian mind, body, and spirit, as well as the remedy for it, runs as a common thread through today’s scripture texts. Hebrews and Luke identify all too clearly who has been neglected, and how we can have a better awareness and care for them as well. Across each of the passages from Jeremiah, Psalms, Hebrews, and Luke we see the relinquishing of pride, anxiety, and control in order to learn humility before God and others. Finally, each of these texts also re-orient us toward Christ and reminds us of what it means to embody our Christian identity. Through such an awareness of the neglected, humility before the power and will of God, and an orientation toward Christ as the definition of our identity, we shall find a reclamation and application of Christian memory as a remedy for our spiritual dementia. One of the first things that the text from Hebrews commands us to remember is to have an awareness of neglected peoples. Without question or caveat, the author of Hebrews begins in verse two, *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers*, and continues into verse three, *Remember those who are in prison as though you were in prison with them; [and] those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured*. At our worst, these are the ones we the church forget in our dementia; but even in some of our better moments, we do little more than patronize them by throwing money or ‘prayers’ their way, all the while not realizing our own fallen state. Hebrews 13:16 clearly addresses this tendency as well, stating, *Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have*. Luke 14:13 clarifies this even more, *Invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind*. This command is not just an issue of generosity, but also humility.

The command to care for the neglected comes with a promise as well—a promise from God to empower the people of God, that we may be a blessing to the world. Being aware of and serving the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind is not purely enough, however, to remedy our dementia if we are doing so with a sense of superiority in mind; in order to fully follow this command and receive the promise, we must humble ourselves before God and others. But just like Israel in Psalms and Jeremiah, we often forget the God that we are serving and the value of paying attention to God’s guidance on how to care for the world. Psalm 81:11 states clearly, *My people did not listen to my voice*; and Jeremiah 2:11, *My people have changed their glory for something that does not profit*. Perhaps verse thirteen of Jeremiah best defines our tendency to use our own intelligence or resources apart from God, for God says, *My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water*. We must remember to use prayer and discernment with God in order to discover and evaluate best practices. And as Luke points out, we must not always claim a place of honor for ourselves, for it may be another person, another organization, institution, or culture to which God has provided the necessary answers.

The Lord works in mysterious ways indeed and it is in this promise to empower the humble that we must trust. Our scripture passages from Psalms and Jeremiah also remind us of this guarantee from God, *I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. Open your mouth wide and I will fill it, for I brought you into a plentiful land to eat its fruits and its good things*. Caring for the neglected is an exercise in collaboration with and service to God, *For he has said, ‘I will never leave you or forsake you.’ So we can say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.’* In this way, we have been given the privilege and the opportunity to bless the rest of the world in the particular ways that God has blessed us, not for our own influence or insight, but with the help of and for the sake of God’s outpoured and overflowing redemptive blessings. God calls out to us through the Psalm, *O that my people would listen to me that Israel would walk in my ways!* So we must remember the opportunity to respond and *Sing aloud to God our strength!* who blesses and redeems the world!

It is necessary, then, that we be attentive, persistent, and active in our humble service, for just like Jesus in Luke 14:1, the world is watching closely. We can say we need to care for the neglected, empowered by the promise of God to serve humbly as followers of Christ, but we must make sure that we are fully remembering, embracing, and embodying our identity in Christ. As Hebrews points out, this is done through both the words and deeds of lives, so *let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name...not neglect[ing] to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God*. In remembering our identity in Christ, we the church have the opportunity to continue the work that God did through Israel, to re-orient this world back toward God, helping to bring about the blessing that is the coming kingdom of God. A fascinating alternative translation of Psalm 81:14-16 perhaps best describes the result of remembering our identity in the Lord, for God says, *I would reach out my hand to [your] opponents. Those who hated the Lord would change their selves toward God, and God would be with them forever*. Indeed this is the salvific result of remembering our identity in Christ and working humbly to serve the neglected. It points people not to ourselves, but toward God, so that we all may look to the Lord, remember, and experience the love the God.

Although I don't know how much longer my grandma will be able to be the same invested person I initially described, I have come to learn that sometimes just seeing a familiar face can help a person with dementia remember. These far too brief moments of reclamation and retrieval of my grandmother's memory provide her with names, places, events, and occasionally even some quite valuable insights. This, I believe, is no different with the church's communal dementia—just as my grandmother is reminded by the face of my father, my aunts, my cousins, my siblings, or myself, the church, and the world too, needs to re-orient, to turn, to look into the face of God. I wonder if God has felt the same way toward humanity over its history as I do toward my grandmother, leaning into a deep love even as our battle with spiritual dementia rages, which is as much a result of our active diminishment of memorial rituals as it is passively from our fallen sinful state. We all too often forget what we are supposed to be doing here, how we are to serve, and who God says we are.

Ultimately, it is Jeremiah 2, verses 6 and 8 that proposes the essential and repeated question: *Where is the Lord?* ...Where **is** the Lord? What work is God already doing in the world? ...So this is my challenge to you, to us: look to the face of God—you shall see and remember, just as my grandmother does. What neglected and needy people do we see reflected in the eyes of God? What direction do we see God's gaze pointing? How are we orienting and moving ourselves and other people toward the open and blessed arms of God? It is in asking the question, "Where is the Lord?" that an active and continued process for the reclamation of Christian memory begins; and it is in the application of these newly remembered commands, promises, and experiences that inform a more fully aware, fully humbled, and fully oriented reality which is the coming of the kingdom of God. For indeed this is the Gospel of our Lord.