

Memory Stick: God's Rich Love
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Hosea 11:1-11
Luke 12:13-21

What makes a memory stick?

Summer vacation means creating memories, snapshots of moments in time that you can store up and visit again and again; perhaps when the winter's chill bites us in 6 months, those memories of sweating our way through July won't seem so unpleasant. Or, as much as family knows how to press all your buttons, you still plan the yearly reunion trip because those memories of being together, especially for the younger generation, are more important than avoiding the occasional clash your loved ones bring.

I had a philosophy professor in college who told our class that he did not believe in taking pictures. Instead, he wanted to be present, mindful, of every moment and in every contour of his most meaningful, or beautiful experiences. The memories made from that, he told us, held more value than any picture could contain.

My wife comes from a totally different perspective: if there's not a picture of it, it might as well not have happened.

This belief holds so true to Chris that, years ago, when we went to Hawaii, she did something neither of us ever thought she would do-- just for the picture. We were driving through Maui, when we saw this incredible cliff jutting out over the ocean. We also saw a few people gathered at the edge, each one jumping into the water. This was my territory, so of course we pulled over. And with me on the cliff, and Chris on the beach, Chris was my photographer as I made that exhilarating jump with little hesitation into the blue-green water below. When I swam to shore, Chris showed me her perfect shot: she had captured me midair, gracefully leaping between cliff and sea. Not only that: I was wearing an electric blue bikini, and the gravity of my jump had done me lots of favors. Chris was so pleased with her shot that she decided she would put aside her fear of the ocean, its depths, and the creatures that lie within to take a turn, with the expectation that she also would be able to have the same moment of glory captured in a forever memory: a picture, to have and to hold.

When we look back on the photo reel I shot from Chris' jump, there are three pictures: first, a picture of Chris' foot leaving the cliff. Next, a splash on the surface of the water. And finally, a picture of Chris coming out of the water, looking angry because I had just told her I had missed the shot.

The prophet Hosea speaks to the people Israel as if they had forgotten their memories; they had failed to capture and savor the moments when God had caringly created with them as their relationship grew. "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son..." "I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them." Yet it is clear Israel has forgotten this tender relationship with their God. Hosea continues, "The more I called to them, the more they went from me..." "My people are bent on turning away from me." The result of this break in relationship, which has caused the people to follow other gods, is that they have fallen into the hands of their enemies, their cities taken by sword.

Remember, the ancient prophets were rarely speaking about one person's sin, or of individual evil. The prophets were almost always speaking to the shortcomings of the whole community, the whole nation, the whole people of God-- who were far more broken than whole. I feel that right now, don't you? We woke up this morning to find there was another mass shooting in the night, the second within 24 hours, the third within one week. We can speak of a few sinful and deranged individuals, but we must also speak of the harmfulness of this country's relaxed gun laws that permit human evil to have huge and devastating consequences. We also hear a growing, anti-immigrant voice in this country that lures people towards white supremacy and acts of evil. We have forgotten that it is the Lord that has gathered us in from the lands, as Psalm 107 proclaims, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.

We must remember who we are: people whom God made to be accountable to one another and to God-- not only to ourselves. Hosea invites Israel to do just that, for in remembering comes redemption: a rediscovery of that beloved relationship, and a restoration of their cities and homes, and a chance to make a new start.

What a treasure God's rich love is! God, who has loved each of us before even our parents knew and loved us, always welcomes a return to that loving state where we began-- no matter how far or terribly we have rebelled. This truth is a core treasure of Christian living, and Jesus tries to get the rich man to understand how valuable this treasure is-- more precious than silver or gold. More precious than a barnful of grain.

Jesus calls the rich man a fool, but the truth is this man does not start out looking so bad by today's standards or by biblical standards either. His land produced abundantly. There is nothing inherently wrong with that; in fact, some readers of the Torah would say that this abundance was a sign of God's favor on his faithfulness. Building structures to store your abundance does not seem so bad either-- if we came into extra money, we know it would be wiser to put that money in a savings account than to things we do not need, right? And when the rich man says to his soul, "Relax! Eat, drink, be merry!" he is only doing what the writer in Ecclesiastes came up with.

However, one thing I notice when I read this parable is how this rich man uses pronouns: "What should *I* do, for *I* have no place to store **my** crops?"¹⁸ Then he said, '*I* will do this: *I* will pull down **my** barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all **my** grain and **my** goods. ¹⁹And *I* will say to **my** soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' Do you notice how many times he says *I* or *my*? *11 times!* And even when he switches to the pronoun *you*, it is only when he is talking to himself about himself.

Instead of giving gratitude for, or even just recognizing all the other things that went into his success-- such as the richness of the soil, the benefit of good weather, the hard work of his laborers, the parents or whoever gave him the land to begin with, the community with whom he could be sharing his food and wealth, and the God who was generous in the first place, the rich man acted as if only **he** was responsible for **his** luck, and that it should all belong to **him**. The man may have been rich, yes, but he completely missed what it means to be rich towards God.

Remember, people, the treasure God has already set within you. The rich man forgot how much he already had that thought he had to build a new barn. Have you forgotten too, what you mean to God, and what a treasure God's love is for you?

There was an interesting quiz the New York Times posted last week: "Are You Rich?" You plug in your income, city and age, plus your understanding of what "rich" means in this country: top 25%? Top 15%? Top 5%? And the article states that "Many Americans at the top of the income ladder don't like to think of themselves as rich, preferring words like 'affluent' or 'comfortable' or 'lucky.'" The article states that the word "rich" can "carry connotations of greed, opulence, or entitlement, which, not surprisingly, few want to be associated with" and in addition to that, I suspect people do not want to have any moral

obligation to share their wealth, so if they just pretend they are part of the middle class, struggling like everyone else, there is less expectation on their giving, less accountability towards people who really are in need. On the flip side, the myth of the middle class as where everyone belongs is so strong in the US that the Wall Street Journal reported last week that “Families Go Deep in Debt to Stay in the Middle Class.”

Remember— my grandfather forgot everything in his old age, due to Alzheimer’s. I used to drive him to church when he could no longer drive himself, and sit with him in the same pew he had sat for decades, surrounded by the same friends he had known for decades. All them had watched me grow up, sitting beside my grandparents in that pew. Still, he used to try to introduce me to these folks who knew me quite well. During the passing of the peace, he would tell them proudly, “I would like to introduce you to... to...to...” and his voice would falter. “Well,” he continued, “I just call her sweetheart.” Even though he had forgotten the names of his most beloved family members, he never forgot that he belongs to God. As the disease progressed, he would sit silently throughout the service, with his head hung low. I thought he was asleep. But then the organ would fill the chambers of our rib cages and when we could feel the floor resonating with the into, my grandfather would rise to his feet and sing with as just a resonant bass, “This is my story, this is my song! Praising my Savior all the day long!”

I hope the very last thing I am able to do will be to praise God. In the end, I suppose that will matter more than how much money I make, how big my barn is, or what class I belong to. In the end, I belong only to God. It is something worth remembering.

Do this in remembrance of me, Jesus told us. He did not have photography. He did not have Facebook reminders of what he was doing 2000 years ago. He did not have a memory drive. He didn’t have a really, really big barn to store all he wanted to give to us. But he left us a meal, one that we serve over and over again, and that we can taste: yeast, salt, flour. Robust, tangy grape. His body, his blood. Here now, and we remember. What a treasure.