

Revelation 21: 1-6a
Creekside COB
November 5, 2006
"All Saints Day"

"Selective Amnesia"

In 1937, International Chess Master George Koltanowski set a world record for blindfolded Chess. He defeated 34 players simultaneously without looking at any of the boards. When he died, *The New York Times* reported that "Mr. Koltanowski is survived by his wife, Leah, who never learned to play chess and often joked that her husband could not remember to bring bread home from the grocery."

Women say that men have selective hearing. They say that we hear only what we want to hear, and are oblivious to the rest. George Koltanowski had a phenomenal memory of things related to chess, but when it came to routine requests, he seems to have had selectivity issues. You might say that George was afflicted with selective amnesia. If only we possessed the ability to erase from our memory those things that bring us great guilt, grief, and pain and keep us from getting on with our lives.

Contrary to what the calendar says, Memorial Day is not the last week of May. In the church year, today is Memorial Day. For centuries the church has set aside this Sunday to remember its departed saints—great ones and not as great ones. Today is All Saints Day. It is a time to hallow the memory of the saints who have gone before us. By their witness, they have shown us what a life devoted to God is all about. On All Saints Day we do not honor *the* dead. We honor *our* dead... those we have known and loved, those we have heard stories about, and those remembered by no one except God.

The Bible puts a premium upon remembering. The Christian faith is not just concerned about here and now, nor is it

concerned only about here after. Christianity is a historic faith that is understood only to the extent that we *remember* the events and personalities that shaped it.

- Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy
- Remember-- you shall not kill, commit adultery, or steal.
- Remember that you were slaves in Egypt.
- Remember the wonderful works of him who called you out of the darkness and into the light.
- “When you eat the bread and drink the cup, do it in remembrance of me.”
- “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Remembrance is vital. Without the ability to remember we are lost souls with no connections to anyone or anything. Our memory of others and the things we’ve shared is a way of carrying part of who they are with us. The remembrance that God loves us gives us power to prevail against the onslaughts of life.

But the willingness to forget is also vital. Unfortunately for us, hatred has a very good memory, and nursing the pains of the past keeps us captives to history and captives inside our own skins.

Consider how life might be if we could selectively erase the memory of the cruel, hurtful things we have experienced. Return to the grand vision of John in Revelation 21. The last battle and last judgment are over. The sparkling new Jerusalem is descending from heaven. A voice like thunder declares that for all eternity, God will dwell with his people. The former things will be no more. The last tears will be wiped away. Death will be history. No more crying. No more dying. No more grieving. No more pain. It will all be forgotten.

We’re still waiting for it to materialize. Everywhere we look there are tears and fears and pain and death galore. Until the new

Jerusalem shows up, we will have to sort out what to recall and what to forget, and that, friends, is hard.

Years after a bitter divorce, a woman still struggled with intense anger toward her ex-husband. Finally, after many talks with her pastor, he said to her, “Look, we’ve tried getting beyond your justifiable anger at him. We tried forgiving him and you’re still stuck. I think there is only one answer.” “What’s that?” she asked. Her pastor replied, “You’re going to have to kill him. It’s the only way you will get loose from this man. Your attempt to be divorced is lasting longer than most marriages!”

The only hope we have of forgetting the things that keep us stuck in anger and resentment, is in God’s decision to forgive us and forget our sin. If God is all-knowing, God remembers everything-- every hurtful and every hateful thing humanity has ever done. God remembers what we did to the Son he sent to save us. God remembers every jot and title of everything we have done. How God must suffer, and yet, *God remembers to forget.*

Listen to God’s promise in Isaiah—Remember not the former things... behold, I am doing a new thing; do you not perceive it? (43:18) I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins (43:25). In Psalm 25 is a verse that has comforted me. “Remember not the sins of my youth, or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me...”

Remember not the sins of my youth. Here are words to stir the memory. College parties. Establishments with names like, “The Little Brown Jug” and “The Mainview.” Dives and dens of iniquity. Animal House revisited. You do have memories to stir, don’t you? Stowed away in the attic or somewhere in the back of a closet is a locked chest that contains “the sins of our youth.” It hasn’t seen the light of day for years.

During a vulnerable moment in college I experienced a sudden lapse of judgment. The guys in the dorm were cooking up a scheme that, at the time, seemed like a pretty cool thing to do.

Without getting specific, mob psychology kicked in, and before I knew what was happening I was in the thick of things. Unfortunately the college administration got wind of it and they witnessed the thick of things and took notes on the participants. The next day, the word was that President Helman was inviting the students of Schwalm Hall into his office for a little chat, followed by rites of penance. I was relieved not to have received an invitation and figured I had not been spotted.

Twenty years later I was in the Helman's home visiting Blair's wife, Pat. Blair joined our discussion and for some reason the subject of college student's behaviors came up. He recalled the time a student transgressed a college policy and the student's father was frustrated because he thought Blair should have come down hard on his son. Blair asked the father, "Would you have wanted me to do to you what you want me to do to your son over that incident when *you* were a student here?" "I'll bet that changed the father's tune," I said to Blair. And looking at me Blair remarked, "I remember another student that pulled a prank that I decided to forget." I said, "Thank you."

Over the years of my ministry I've talked with many people whose lives are stuck because they can't let go of a past hurt. They have every right to feel what they do. Their anger is justifiable. They did nothing to deserve the treatment they received. I'm grateful to God that the hurts I have experienced, as devastating as some have been, haven't destroyed me, but have made me more empathetic and considerate and forgetful. It doesn't mean that all the memories are gone. I sometimes catch myself dredging it up and getting perverse pleasure from licking old wounds. But we can't be disciples of Jesus and slaves to our past.

The Lord knows I am no poster child for forgiving and forgetting. But I can tell you that prayer and honesty between yourself and God, the pain will not have as great a grip. With time and God's grace, we learn to let go of the past. We are given eyes to see those who hurt us in a new light. We discover that the recollection of a person's negative aspects recedes, and we are

able to see again and appreciate and be grateful for their good qualities.