"To Remember, To Forget"

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Parish in Wayland
November 11, 2018

Forty years from now, will anyone remember who renovated the kitchen we are about to bless? Or, will future members (or, maybe some of you, older and grayer) just shake their heads about the dated tile and old fixtures as they consider where to find the money for a change? Will anyone remember that we were required by the town—and our own principles of inclusivity—to make the kitchen ADA accessible? Or that construction was delayed when the young adult son of the contractor tragically died in his sleep?

What will be remembered? What will be forgotten?

Memory can be fickle. As wondrous as our minds are—not everything 'sticks' or remains available for instant recall. So much passes through the sieve of our attention even as we also retain much in our memory. Our memories tell us how to get home from the grocery store. They tell us to gather here at 10:00am on a Sunday morning. Memories help us to read, to comprehend what we read, and to tell another about it later in the day.

Memory links moment to moment, month to month, year to year. Memories become the grist for the narrative mills of our lives—the source material for the stories of who we are: *Where did you grow up? Where did you go to school? Who were your family? Your friends?*

What do you remember? Who do your memories tell you that you are?

My earliest memory is of a flying bat in my bedroom. As a young child, four or less, I slept with a nightlight which cast just enough light to see the bat. I remember that it came from my closet. But I don't remember actually seeing the bat emerge. Even so, this memory lingers so certainly in my mind that to this day I must close the closet door before I sleep.

What memories have shaped you, your behavior, your sense of who you are?

And, how do you keep these memories alive? Have you kept a record? To whom have you told your stories?

Below where I am standing are the archives of First Parish. Boxes upon boxes hold the institutional memory of this congregation—perhaps there is even a box about the last kitchen renovation. I know there are documents and photos of the last steeple renovation.

© Stephanie May 2018

Perhaps you remember the steeple lying upon the front lawn? Or maybe you recall David Lang telling the story of how he rescued the discarded copper and installed it as art? An installation that happened to be hanging in the narthex when he died. At least that's how I remember it.

Memories connect us to people, to places, to moments and experiences of life. At a memorial service, we honor a person's life by sharing our memories of them. *I remember mom reading to us. I remember sitting with dad to watch the game. I remember my grandmother's pies on the Thanksgiving table. I remember how he sang when he wooed me. I remember her laugh, his curiosity, their love.*

In some real sense, remembering those we have known and those we have loved keeps them alive.

Of course, not all memories are 'good.' We also remember our heartbreaks, the shocking news that changed our lives, as well as the painful or even traumatic experiences whose memories may remain too vividly in our psyches . . . or, perhaps, deeply buried beneath of haze of fear and pain. These hard memories also shape the stories of who we are.

We <u>are</u> shaped by our memories. But, do we not also shape our memories by *how* we remember them? By the stories we tell ourselves about our memories? Perhaps we remember how a parent was not home very often—but do we tell a story of their abandonment and distance or of their dedication to their work or the commitment to put food on the table? How we frame our memories can significantly shape their impact on our lives. One therapist suggested to me that reframing memories is central to the work of therapy. Why do we want to remember that something happened *that* way? What might happen if we changed the story?

In a Tedtalk, columnist David Brooks challenges his audience to consider the frame they are using to shape the narrative of their lives. He asks whether they are living for their résumé or their eulogy? Living for one's résumé, suggests Brooks, focuses our attention on our *skills*. While living for one's eulogy, he counters, turns our energies to our depths of *character* and the nature of our relationships. I'm not sure I entirely agree with Brooks (which, as a side note, I often find to be the case with David Brooks). While I certainly agree that so much of what matters at the moment of a Memorial Service is the nature of our character, I have also witnessed and even encouraged eulogies that also name the skills and achievements of a person. So often, *what* we do in life can matter—the math we did that helped to land a person on the moon, the art we created that shifts how people see, as

© Stephanie May 2018

well as the children we educated, the votes we garnered, or the church kitchens we helped to renovate. In multiple ways, our lives leave our fingerprints in the world.

I've been thinking a lot about fingerprints through the kitchen renovation. There is something humbling about changing a part of a building that has witnessed many generations and will witness more to come. The fingerprints of these prior generations surround us. The chalice has a small plaque remembering Brownie Parker. The elevator has another to John Brooke Gregory. We refer to Stokey Library or the Fenn Room. More distantly, on the wall of the sanctuary there is a framed copy of the pew chart with names of families and persons long dead. And, of course, there are these two signs: one to the sometimes ministers of this church and the hymn rack dedicated to "the men of the parish who in war gave their lives for country and for God."

But these examples are only the named memorials. I look at these memorials and I wonder about the unnamed fingerprints left behind? Who ordered this chalice and designed the plaque? Who were the soldiers of this congregation who fought and died in war? Who were the heartbroken loved ones who arranged for the sign?

Behind every memorial, there are those who chose to keep the memory alive. There are those who decide that something must be done so that they and others do not forget. There are those who know the story, who hold the memories, and feel the need to make sure a marker remains.

But why? Why do so many of us value the creation of markers and memorial stones, plaques and mementos? For me, I see in these markers an expression of our longing for transcendence. By remembering a person beyond their death, their life transcends death . . . at least in some way. Death is not final and complete. Memory remains. Stories remain. Fingerprints remain.

Memory is an experience of transcendence. It connects this moment here, now with another moment from the past. Memory allows us a kind of transcendence over time that allow us to link past and present and even the future. When we make choices today about what markers to construct of our memories and our moments, we begin to shape the stories and the memories of the future. We begin to shape what another generation will and will not know about us, those we love, the moments we have experienced.

And yet, the poem Keith read, "Forgetfulness" by Billy Collins, reminds us that memories can also be fleeting. We forget the names and the stories. For many—including many of you—the experience of memory loss feels disorienting and debilitating. While Collins

© Stephanie May 2018

manages to frame this loss with a bit of humor, he also ends his poem with a question of transcendence: what remains when the proper names and dates have disappeared?

Last week, I attended the funeral of a close family friend, Muriel, who died at 93 after a battle with Alzheimer's. I last saw her at a family wedding about a year ago. Amidst the festivities, she wandered person to person graciously asking, "have we met?" So many of her memories were gone, but her kind sociability remained. From moment to moment, she greeted the experience of life as she had when she could remember your name and why you were both at the wedding.

This is not to minimize the tremendous loss and difficulty of living with Alzheimer's or loving someone with Alzheimer's or other forms of dementia. But it is to ask what the loss of memory may teach us about the role of memory in our lives? The very pain of losing memories seems to reflect how deeply we rely upon memories to link together the seasons of our lives and shape the narrative of who we understand ourselves to be. Does losing our memories mean we lose who we are?

There is no simple answer to this question. Yes, our memories are containers for so much of our lives. They hold the stories of our love and our heartbreak, our fulfilled dreams and our disappointments. Our memories bridge the moments of our lives. They connect us with others who remember the same people, the same experiences, the same changes.

And yet, we lose our memories. We forget the plot of the book, the name of a neighbor, the reason we came upstairs. Accustomed to the role of memory in orienting our actions, these losses can have significant impact—both practically, but also emotionally as our connections to the past feel frayed.

What remains when we have forgotten our memories? Perhaps as Billy Collin's poem suggests, there is the possibility of learning again, of remaining engaged with life—albeit with a more porous sense of knowing and unknowing, of past and present. Or, perhaps, as Muriel demonstrated and Brooks recommends, there is something of our character that remains.

And what about when we ourselves are forgotten? Maybe for some of us our names will be written on a marker or memorial—our stories passed down from generation to generation. But, I suspect for most of us and for most of what we do in life, our presence upon the earth will linger not in etched stone or brass, but in less visible fingerprints. The children we raised as parents, teachers, or mentors carry forth a bit of our values and insight. The tree we plant or the land we helped conserve gives shelter to birds or renewal to a person out

© Stephanie May 2018

for a walk. Or, perhaps an institution that we helped to support—or to renovate—remains vibrant into the future. And, maybe, some future generation will pause to consider—who chose that tile layout in the kitchen? Whose fingerprints helped to preserve this place that I love? And how might I also leave my fingerprints so that some memory, some trace of me might also remain?

Whatever may be remembered or forgotten of our past, our memories, or our lives, may we find some meaning in knowing that with or without a plaque, we have played a part in shaping the corner of the world in which we lived. Our fingerprints remain.

So may it be. Amen.

© Stephanie May 2018