

"RE-MEMBERING"
SCRIPTURE: JOB: 19-23-27a; LUKE 20:27-38
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
November 6, 2016
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Luke 20: 27-38

20:27 Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him

20:28 and asked him a question, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother.

20:29 Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless;

20:30 then the second

20:31 and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless.

20:32 Finally the woman also died.

20:33 In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her."

20:34 Jesus said to them, "Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage;

20:35 but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage.

20:36 Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection.

20:37 And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.

20:38 Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive."

The Word of the Lord
Thanks be to God

For Andy Catlett¹, remembering is not nostalgia; it is not reminiscence.

So much of who he was, so much of what the world looked and felt like, so much of what had always made him feel alive was gone.

It was an October day of the corn harvest. Neighbors and family friends in Andy's Kentucky town had come together all season to help young 22 year old Jack bring in his harvest after his dad, Elton, died in March.

If they could just keep working into the night, they would finish. There were plenty of hands there to help—and it had been a day that came naturally—but as night began to set in, the feeling of urgency came alongside their ease. The pace picked up.

Andy was running the picker. It had been jamming that afternoon and when it jammed again, he jumped out to clear it but left it running.

His right hand, the hand that led his good work, the hand that he extended to greet his neighbors, his kin, the hand that connected him to his children's explorations and his wife's affections—that hand, his right hand, was in a split second taken into the picker.

For Andy Catlett, re-membering is not nostalgia, it is not reminiscence. Re-membering is finding a way to go on when he will never again be whole.

How do we live with the pieces of what's left when so much feels missing, so much is gone? How do we live in a dis-membered present. Anyone living with loss embodies this excruciating question.

Re-membering invites us to live into a future that feels impossible.

Job's cries to God for justice culminate in these few lines with a remarkable defiance given everything that he has lost.

Job is way past prayer—in fact Job has clearly rejected prayer's language, even mocked its usefulness. His cries for justice go unanswered—he sees that, he knows that.

And so he comes to this statement—four short verses that could easily stand as a manifesto for all who have been falsely accused, all who have felt their lives unravel from injustice.

We Christians often misunderstand this passage. The easiest way for us to read this passage is as a profession of Job's belief in bodily resurrection.

Some translations even capitalize the word “Redeemer” in the passage to suggest that Job is using a title, a particular referent, instead of a generic noun. And so our Christian ears and eyes can easily turn this passage into one that sounds a lot like something we would say about Jesus. And Job’s important existential moment of truth is mistaken for a proof text for the Christian Messiah.

Bodily resurrection was not something that would have been a part of Job’s spiritual or theological framing of reality. In fact, quite the opposite. This early Israelite context was characterized by a view of the dead as knowing nothing—the afterlife was not a concept—so some kind of post-death vindication in which Job would finally see justice is an illogical way to approach this text.

Christianizing this passage actually robs it of its power. Job’s defiance is much more provocative, especially in our world today, when we look at it not through our Christian lenses but through Job’s dogged refusal to let God off the hook in the face of injustice.

Job is not crying out to a God who satisfies things in the great hereafter. Job is confident that he will be vindicated on earth. But, in the Hebrew it is clear that the vindicator that Job refers to is not God—Job’s vindicator is someone who he can count on to argue his case against God, the Hebrew word refers to a male family member, someone whose legal duty it was to have his kinfolk’s back when they were wronged. Job figured that legal requirement of his family would kick in at some point—even if after he was dead and gone.

God is on trial here by a man wrongly accused. Where do you fit in the picture, God, when injustice afflicts those who don’t deserve it?

The last two lines of the passage articulate a profound desire for a man who is suffering the depths of what Job is suffering—I will be vindicated someday by my family, what I really want is to see you, God—while I am alive—to know where you fit in this picture, to know how to understand your relationship to what is happening to me right now. I want to know that you live, God, and that you are somehow connected to what true justice looks like.

Job’s is the question of human existence. It is the cry of centuries and generations—from solitary confinement and cotton fields, to those who live with trauma, with loss, with lonely days and sleepless nights. Where are you, God of justice, God of mercy? How do I see you? How do I see my life in you?

All Andy Catlett felt on his farm after he lost his hand was angry, useless, bitter.

His right hand was gone. And he was untethered in the world. His right hand had held all that was dear, all that connected him to who he was.

Now when he reached out he lacked confidence, dexterity. Everything was hard. Everything was an emblem of his dismemberment.

The tools that required two hands were now strangers to him. Mindlessly buttoning buttons, carrying buckets and switching hands to open a gate, exploring the contours of his beloved—all of these things were dead and gone, beyond his reach.

One day in his despair, Flora, his wife came to him and tried to comfort him. “What did they do with my hand?” He asked her. He wondered where it was. Had they thrown it away? He should have buried it.

When he pushed the question angrily, she had no answer but to recoil at his anger.

“Just leave me alone,” he said. And so that is where Andy found himself, alone—outside the bounds of the life and love he had known for the land, for home, for family, for work, for himself.

Losing his right hand meant he no longer fit—how could he go on with so much of him missing? The world seemed like foreign territory. And he was no longer at home.

No one, nothing could be trusted.

Everyone appears only half alive to Andy—disconnected from one another, disconnected from the land—rushing through days and hours distracted by their alienation, distracted from their alienation.

Everyone seemed cut off, not just his hand, but the soul of the world.

Luke’s gospel invites us to imagine the details of bodily resurrection, the contours of eternity.

When we take our laws, when we take our virtues, our realities and try to overlay them on eternity we can come up with some baffling questions.

The rules of levirate marriage are the test case brought by the Sadducees. If it is the law for a man to marry the widowed wife of his brother, and brothers just keep dying off and then the next one marries the wife—and that happens seven times, who is this woman’s husband in the eternal realm?

Jesus tells us that eternity is not about technicalities, it is about vitality, it about profound immediacy to God.

It is our true nature that we share in God's eternal nature.

Sometimes we are caught in time, grasping for something to stay the same. Our grasping can atrophy the taste of eternity within us.

Eternity has nothing to do with time or duration. It is our mysterious participation in God—and it is happening even now—re-memembering us, reclaiming and regenerating us for Beauty, for love, indeed, for life.

Andy Catlett recalls himself as a young man who had moved away for college and career finding his way back to Port William, Kentucky to reclaim the land of his heritage and the life of his parents, neighbors, and friends—the farming life.

It was the bend of the river that moved through Port William that etched in his memory how he knew his place. The river's water cupped in his two hands to meet his thirsty lips, the rivers' flow through the land he knew by heart. The trustworthy way the river flowed toward home—he drank it in as a young man. He knew who he was and where he belonged when he found his way to that river.

He remembered Flora's face when he told her they were going home.

He re-memembered her trust, his, and the trust of all those before them. He re-memembered trust—giving yourself to a future that is unproven, unknown. It was trust that losing his hand made him forget.

Re-memembering trust took him to that river once again—accompanied by a cloud of witnesses who re-memembered the sensations of trust deep within him.

He re-memembered their "care," their "dignity"—the blessings of each one of them, the blessings of it all, the blessings of re-memembering.

He finds his way back to the flowing stream—the music of the river that re-memembers Andy's eternity and all those there with him—members one with another with a Beauty that is never lost.

Eternity transcends and is immersed in this moment.

Eternity kindles in us the capacity to let go of our grasping, the yearning, the exile, the fear of too much lost, the anger of "why me." Eternity washes us with our place in this world.

Jesus shows us our eternity—and it looks a lot like this gathering of the earnest and the broken, the wanderers and the wonderers, the dis-membered and those seeking what it feels like to be re-membered anew.

Re-membering is not nostalgia, it is not reminiscence.

Re-membering is trusting the healing opportunities in every twist and turn life brings us to, trusting the promise of life that grows from places of loss, the places where that which we thought defined us has gone missing.

Re-membering is trusting the bend of the river that leads us toward home—our home in a re-membering God.

This is a re-membering table—a table of mercy, a table where we bring our burdens, our joys, and our pain, our delight, a table where we bring our betrayed, dismembered, and grieving selves, our hopes and dreams to a place defined by the the sensations, the quenching waters of God’s mysterious way of meeting us where we are with the tender mercy in which nothing is lost.

This is the joyful feast, the feast of God’s re-membered people God.

Thanks be to God.

¹ Wendell Berry, Remembering: A Novel. (Counterpoint Press: Berkeley, CA), 2008. This novel is the story of farmer, Andy Catlett, in Port William, KY, the fictional setting for many of Berry’s novels.