

Reformation Sunday
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

October 28, 2007
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 46;
Romans 3:19-28; John 8:31-36

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The magazine *National Geographic* had a fascinating article on memory in its most recent issue. This feature article described a 41-year-old woman who is known in the article only by her initials, AJ, whose abilities in memory have prompted doctors to coin a whole new medical term for her condition; it is called *hpyerthymestic syndrome*. She can remember almost every day in her life since she was 11. She can remember the day and time when a boy she had a crush on called her on the telephone. That was at 12:34 p.m. on Sunday, August 3, 1986. She can remember the specific episode of the sit-com *Murphy Brown* that was aired on December 12, 1988. She remembers the important and the mundane, the global and the personal. She says it has become a kind of compulsion with her. AJ says, "When I'm blow drying my hair in the morning, I'll think of whatever day it is. And to pass the time, I'll start mulling over in my mind that day in the last twenty-something years. Like flipping through a Rolodex." (I talked about the Rolodex in the early service, and was informed that I was showing my age. So for those of you younger than I (not many of you!), a Rolodex is a handy way to file cards, business cards; it's almost like a wheel that you spin . . . I can also tell you about phonograph albums, in case you have the time!). So AJ flips through the days of her life over the past twenty-odd years, like she's flipping through a Rolodex.

Now when you and I struggle to recall where we put the car keys, or what the name is of the person sitting directly behind us in the pew, we might be just a bit envious that we lack AJ's remarkable ability to remember. But AJ would not wish this ability on anyone. She said, "I remember the good, which is very comforting. But I also remember the bad. I remember every bad choice. And I really don't give myself a break", she says. "There are all these forks in the road, moments you have to make a choice, and then it's ten years later and I'm still beating myself up over them. I don't forgive myself for a lot of things . . .", AJ says. "Most people have called what I have a gift, but I call it a burden."

So AJ remembers her bad choices. We might not have *hpyerthymestic syndrome*, but you and I certainly can recall our mistakes, the bad choices we've made in our lives. And AJ is absolutely correct in saying that sometimes that's a burden. Can you recall something that you did years ago that still embarrasses you?

Ten years ago, my dad (who was then 70), was busy telling me how when he was a boy he and his school chums used to jump onto moving boxcars of trains. Do you know how dangerous that is? Do you know how easy it would have been for my father or one of those other boys to fall under the train and get sliced in half? Well, my father is busy telling me this story about nine years ago about something he did years before. And in the very next breath, he said to me, "Don't tell your Grandma Rouse that I did that as a kid!" As if my 94 year old grandmother

could beat him with a hickory stick! But see, after all those years, my dad still felt guilty about something he had done years earlier that was foolish and risky. It's funny how memory works. Then there's the hindsight that comes from the remembering of what we've done; when we realize that our actions or our words and deeds from years ago have long term residual consequences. The things we did that were wrong, the sins we committed so long ago that we'd hoped we'd buried for good, well, they're more like those Halloween decorations I see in people's front yards – you know the ones, they must come in five pieces: the skeleton legs and arms and a skull and it looks as though he's coming up out of the grave. That's what our memories are like. We'd like to forget some of the things we've done, but it's funny how memory works – those things we did come back to haunt us. And the bad choices we made have impact on our present.

Of course sometimes we manage to manipulate our memories just enough so that we can look at our past words and deeds and actually find a way to justify them. We can so distort our memory of an event that we end up concluding, “Well, gee, looking back now, I'm kind of glad I did that. Yeah, I had good reason to.” Yes, it's funny how memory works.

So today, we hear Paul in his letter to the Romans, say this “through the law comes the knowledge of sin”. What an insightful phrase. In other words, Paul says the law serves as a memory cue to us that we haven't followed the law. Now remember what the law is here. The Lord God gave the people of Israel a set of rules for holy living, that they might stay in this covenantal relationship with the Holy God. The Law, which includes the well-known Ten Commandments, functioned this way: it let people know what their part, what the people's part of the covenant was to be. So there were rules covering all daily aspects of life: rules for justice, rules for purity, rules for faithful worship, and these were the laws that an Israelite obeyed in order to remain in a right relationship with the righteous God. Only Paul, who had once been a rather strict and observant Jew, following the law to the letter, now says there's a new function for the law, a rather novel way for the law to work. He says it discloses sin. It brings sin to light. Much like that memory of a wrong we did years ago that haunts us still. The law, writes Paul, silences us. And in shame and guilt we realize we're accountable to God for all of our words and deeds. And Paul says that no human being . . . no human being can justify themselves through that law.

Which leaves me with that image of the Lord God with some enormous Rolodex, you know, listing every occasion when we, God's people, have failed to be God's people. There's God, just flipping through the Rolodex, all the time.

After all, Paul was right. I spent last week in Sunday school with our eighth grade confirmation class. We were talking about the Ten Commandments, that portion of the law, and we talked about how easy it is for us to say we obey the Ten Commandments. I mean, I haven't murdered anybody recently. Nor have I stolen anything recently. So it looks as though we're obeying them just fine. Until we consider the fullness of those Commandments.

Which is exactly what Martin Luther did. When Martin Luther interpreted the Ten Commandments in his Small Catechism. By looking at that, the confirmation students and I could see that obeying the Fifth Commandment, Thou shalt not kill, wasn't just a matter of not

killing your neighbor, but it also meant seeking the welfare and the well-being of that neighbor. And obeying the Seventh Commandment, Thou shalt not steal, didn't just mean not stealing my neighbor's iPod, it also meant improving and protecting my neighbor's property and anything that belongs to them. So Luther clarifies the Ten Commandments for us, and it helped the confirmation class and me to see how often and how easily we do break the Ten Commandments. Paul was right: the law discloses our sin.

But that image of God with the enormous Rolodex? That isn't where Paul leaves us. Neither does Jeremiah in our Old Testament lesson. Or the psalmist, or John in our gospel. No, the scripture that we hear today, the word that we receive in scripture, adds a crucial point to the image of God with the Rolodex. Okay, the Lord God has this enormous Rolodex, and on it are listed all the occasions when we, God's people, have failed to be God's people. And then? Scripture tells us, wonder of wonders, God rips out every card from the Rolodex. Right and left. "I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more." When Jeremiah prophesied these words of the Lord God to the people of Israel, he was proclaiming that God knew the old covenant could not be kept, that it was broken again and again. And it was never broken on God's part of the covenant; it was always broken on the people's part, because the people simply couldn't keep the law. So Jeremiah said the Lord God would start anew. And He would start with a new covenant where the law wouldn't be written on something exterior to the people, like on the stone tablets were the Ten Commandments were carved; it wouldn't be written on something exterior to the people that could be ignored or neglected or forgotten. Rather, the Lord God would take His word, His law, and He would carve it on the interiors of the people. He would write it on their hearts so they would remember to be the holy people of the holy God, and they would remember to love and obey God, and that would be as natural to them as breathing. And crucial to the whole idea of a brand new covenant was that the Lord God would take the past and toss it away and it would be no more.

Of course, Jeremiah couldn't predict just how radical this new covenant would be, and he didn't know when it was going to happen. Why, years would pass before there would be any evidence of any sort in Israel that the interiors of the people had changed at all. Ultimately it would be the Lord God and His holiness that would have to cover both parts of the covenant. God sent His Son Jesus Christ to our world as His way of achieving just that, covering both parts of the covenant. For Jesus Christ loved and obeyed God the Father, that was as natural to Him as breathing. And Jesus lived out the holiness of God in human form. And Jesus Christ also loved God's people, and that was as natural to Him as breathing. And Jesus died for them. Died for you and me. Poured out His blood and poured out His last breath, taking all our sin on His body, putting all our sin to death.

"I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more." Jeremiah's declaration and God's promise stand in bold relief against all the memories that we dredge up about our past, all the sins we've committed that haunt us, and all the wrongs we've done that breed terrible consequences, and all the events in our lives that we have rationalized and justified by our mind's manipulation. So we have confession here and the church has a treasure in a time of confession, because it's our opportunity to remember in order that God will forget. We come here and take part in corporate confession, and it's not so that God can rub our noses in what we have done, make us wallow in it. No. It's so God, through the new covenant He made in Jesus

Christ, can take away that sin for good. For good. Yes, for the good, for the holiness, for the righteousness of God, to fill in the space in us where sin once resided. God can transform our interiors and write Himself on our hearts and thus change the very direction and substance of our lives. That is the gift God gives to his people. And ultimately, that is what we're called to remember.

Amen.