

## Remembering

Text: Deuteronomy 6:1-12

*Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on September 12, 2021*

For many years after the 9/11 attacks, CNN would replay their coverage of that day on the morning of each anniversary. They would start about 8:30 am, just before the first plane hit at 8:46 am. And they would play it through the closing of US airspace around noon. One plane, two planes, three, and then four. The shock of the total collapse of the towers, the frantic reports coming from those inside the Pentagon, the plane brought down by hero passengers, who sacrificed their lives above a Shanksville, Pennsylvania field to protect an unknown target from a fourth flying bomb. Who? Why? Were there more? Shut everything down until we know.

But I didn't have the TV on that morning. There was no social media. I heard the news of the first plane from a church trustee in the parking lot on my way into a 9 am pastoral counseling session. After about an hour with that person I got back to the house and turned on the TV. I watched, shell-shocked, for just long enough to absorb the enormity of it and then realized, "Wait a minute. I can't just sit and watch this. I'm pastor of a church—I have to respond!" I gathered the few people working over at the church and we decided to open the church for prayer.

I turned on soothing music in the sanctuary, lit the candles, and we put out the sign. The cars began turning into the parking lot before we were even back to the building. I was in that sanctuary crying and praying with people well into the evening. It was all an intense blur from then on. By late Thursday night, our Lay Leader happened to come into the church and found me on the couch in my office, curled up in a fetal position, sobbing. We had a vigil on Wednesday and then again on Friday; I was in charge of a District event on Saturday, and on Sunday the church was packed to the gills with lots of people I had never seen before; desperate to know what to do with their fear and to find some meaning in the horror.

So, when CNN re-broadcast their coverage of that morning the following year, I had never seen most of it before. And then it became a ritual. I watched it every single year. Every minute of it. I felt like it was a way to remember the day; to honor those who had died, including the pilot of Flight 11 out of Boston, who lived in Greenville, New Hampshire, just a couple of towns south of Dover, where I was serving at the time. Kids in our youth group went to school with that man's children. They watched their father die on national TV. Over. And over. And over.

My annual three-hour stint with CNN's re-broadcast was successful in helping me to recall that terrifying day and week. It brought me right back to the moment. It wasn't until CNN stopped the annual ritual, at the request of the families of 9/11 victims, that I realized how harmful it was. The families were saying, "You keep bringing us back into those worst days of our lives, CNN. It's so hard to heal and move forward when you keep pulling us back." And a new thought began to form in my mind.

Maybe there's more to memory than the factual recall of events. While knowing the truth of whatever happened is a critical and necessary first step; if we get stuck in replaying the broadcast over and over in our heads—whether it's the literal broadcast of 9/11 or the broadcast our minds play of our own personal traumas and tragedies—we can easily become stuck there, unable to move into the future God has for us. I thought, maybe recall was necessary but not sufficient for true

remembrance. And then I heard the word differently. To RE-member. Maybe the opposite of remember wasn't to forget; but to **dismember**.

What is trauma if not a dismembering—a tearing apart? Might re-membering be the key to healing? Instead of running from all the flying pieces of our shattered lives, or simply recalling the devastated landscape again and again and again; what if we saw it as a sacred task to gather up whatever pieces of that dismembering still remain and use them to give meaning to what has happened? To re-member them and create something new?

Isn't that what God asked the ancient Israelites to do with their dismembered pieces after 400 years of slavery? They had to somehow re-member that horror into the form of a behavioral covenant to gain access to the Promised Land. Isn't that what Jesus asked of his disciples on the night before he died—in the future, when you share a meal, when you do this, re-member me. Isn't that what the thief asked Jesus to do with his future even in the midst of being dismembered on a cross for his crimes? Jesus, re-member me. I'm sorry for what I've done. Put me back together in a new way when you come into your kingdom. I long to be made whole. Is that the true nature of the Promised Land; of faithfulness; of Heaven? To re-member what has been dismembered? To create something that becomes sacred, holy, and beautiful precisely because of the love poured into the re-membering?

To be sure, we have to stay in recall mode for a while. We have to absorb the facts of what has happened, which can take time. The vigils and rituals in the immediate aftermath of a loss exist to help us do precisely this—to at least begin to absorb the fact of the loss. We name the dead; we erect markers and monuments; we gather with others to help witness to the fact that, yes, this happened and there's no going back. We join support groups and see therapists to help us see all the ways we have been torn apart and to identify where the pieces of our own dismembering lie; what can still be salvaged, and what can't.

But re-membering is not only a process for the major losses. If you think about it, just the passing of time dismembers us. That's why birthdays are a fraught time for so many. However many years we are given on this earth, on each birthday we have one less. The past year can be re-membered, but not re-lived. Every yesterday is scattered to pieces with a new dawn. Just the time from when you and I got up this morning until now is already dust.

And that presents us with a choice. We can say with the writer of Ecclesiastes, "Vanity, vanity, all is vanity," or we can say, "Jesus, remember me." We might set aside a time each night to re-member the day just passed. That's one of the functions of journaling or keeping a diary. It's an intentional re-membering—capturing the pieces that are important from the days and hours now gone and gradually shaping them into a narrative of meaning and purpose. It's why people write memoirs.

Recall is a verb, but if we look at the noun—recollection, to collect again; it points us in the right direction. We survey the damage and, just like the heroes who risked their lives on burning piles of rubble for days and weeks and months after 9/11, we carefully and respectfully re-collect the dismembered pieces so that they can be re-membered into a new and meaningful whole.

That sounds like a linear task—event happens, collect the pieces, re-member them into something that allows us to move forward. But in practice, we move back and forth, in and out of those phases. I'm still finding and tripping over undiscovered pieces of myself that were dismembered by earlier

events in my life. And new dismembering happens daily. Even our own skin replaces itself every 27 days. If we give it attention, we can always find new pieces to add nuance, clarity, vision. Some of those new pieces I've found have been so important that they effectively dismembered my remembering and I've had to start again. The meaning of what I re-member of my life grows and shifts with every passing year.

But as important as our personal re-remembering is, in Jesus there is no "I." There is only "we." You've heard me talk about the problematic aspects I see in our understanding of the Trinity; but in this lies one of its most important teachings. Even God is, in a sense, a "we." God is love and you can't love by yourself. Love must be shared; even within the godhead. A faith that looks at individuals without concern for the broader community is not Christian faith. Any *Christian* remembering has to include not only the meaning and purpose we find for ourselves, but also how that connects with the larger community striving to live God's love for the world. When we remember, we're not shaping merely our own personal history; but finding our place in the larger whole.

The twenty years since 9/11 have shown us how far off the mark our re-remembering can take us, when we use the filter of fear instead of the filter of love for our work. When we don't realize that we may not, even now, have all the pieces; when we don't have the humility to understand that remembering is always a work in progress; when we don't have the frame of a God whose only definition is love as the plumb line for our reconstruction; well—we are living with the results: The scapegoating of Muslims, long and disastrous wars, torture, and entirely new branches of government that sometimes I think have created more terror than they have prevented. It is in the light of these anniversaries that we have a chance to look for the missing pieces that can put our remembering of that tragedy on a more constructive course.

But history shows we're not terribly good at it. The cultural battles we're fighting right now over confederate monuments, critical race theory, the 1619 Project, and more, all have their origins in the different ways we have responded to the massive dismembering of those who were enslaved, the theft of human and natural resources from the entire continent of Africa, and all of the subsequent history of the United States. When we look at the great shattering of lives, languages, cultures, and lands caused by the centuries of slavery and its aftermath; which pieces are included in the remembering? How are they arranged in our memory? Which pieces are given places of honor? Which are intentionally hidden? What pieces of that dismembering still lie buried in dust, yet to be discovered or recognized? And what about the pieces from the genocide of Native Americans and the ongoing dismemberment of the earth that indigenous peoples so carefully tried to guard against for millennia?

We're not going to solve all that in a sermon, but if we learned and practiced the process with our smaller, individual traumas—the daily dismemberment of time, the countless losses of roads not taken, the inevitable loss of someone or something we love—we could build the skills we need for future 9/11's. Or for...oh, I don't know...maybe a global pandemic? I mean more people died from Covid just this past Thursday in Florida than on 9/11. For a year and a half we have been in a dismembering far bigger than any terror attack. And that's before you even begin to talk about the dismembering of our institutions and our politics.

We can't even begin to re-member on any kind of historical scale what is still being actively and furiously dismembered. But I promise you that the way we prevent another Iraq and Afghanistan; another Abu Graib and enhanced interrogation techniques; the way we help turn the corner on the evils of white supremacy and domestic terrorism; conspiracy theories and denial of truth is to start, today, with ourselves.

We remove the log in our own eye, allowing us to see all the ways, big and small, that we have been dismembered; and we start daily to consciously identify and gather the pieces. Acknowledge each one with love and respect, even if some of those pieces are from things we did to ourselves. Forgive, and keep gathering; because God has already done so, and because our future depends on it. Form rituals around that re-collection and observance—a journal, a naming before God in prayer, whatever it is each day.

And then, with loving intention and with God's help, begin to use those dismembered pieces to remember a foundation that can support a new beginning. In building that foundation, you will find your meaning, your purpose, and will finally be able to enter the Promised Land. You will almost certainly enter with pieces still missing; but that's fine. Love will make you whole. And then, through you, the world. Amen.