

All Souls Day (November 2, 2018)
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael A. Renninger

“Mummum, would you like some more roast beef?”

It was Mother’s Day, decades ago. I was home in Pennsylvania, and after church my mom and I drove to the Manatawny Manor to pick up my grandmother, Mummum Renninger.

She was in her mid-90’s. Physically, she was very strong. But dementia had been part of her life for years, and we were experiencing that long, painful goodbye which happens when a loved ones begins to lose memories, names, speech.

Sometimes, she knew us. Other times, she just smiled.

We drove her home, and during lunch we discovered that dementia had *not* taken away her appetite! She ate, a lot. I asked, “Mummum, would you like some more roast beef?” She politely agreed to another slice... and some more mashed potatoes!

I fixed her plate, and the conversation at the table resumed. Then mummum smiled at us and said: “I don’t know who any of you are, but I sure am having a good time today!”

We all laughed. But beneath the laughter was profound sadness. We wanted her to remember. We prayed that she would remember my father’s name: Carl, her youngest son. Prayed that she would remember my mom’s name, or my brother, or me, or *someone*.

We laughed, but there were tears in our eyes. She couldn’t remember. At one point, she looked at the photo I placed near the altar tonight. It’s a picture of mummum and poppop on their 50th wedding anniversary. She saw that photo of her husband... and she had no idea who he was.

Many of you have made similar journeys. Journeys in which loved ones begin to let go. Maybe they had to let go of physical strength due to illness. Maybe they had to let go of energy, because of chemotherapy. Maybe you had to watch as addiction slowly robbed your loved one of life. Or maybe you had to watch as a parent, spouse, friend, started to forget words, then forgot memories, then forgot *you*.

It is so painful when a loved one forgets. But thank God, ***you remember***.

You remember. We remember. That is one of the key reasons that we are here tonight. By celebrating the Feast of All Souls, we are declaring, by our presence and our prayers, that we

remember. No matter how our loved ones *died*, we remember how they *lived*. No matter what they may have *forgotten*, we gratefully *remember*.

We gratefully hold on to every memory and blessing. We place their photos around this altar, because we know that in every celebration of the Eucharist, heaven and earth are united. The living and dead are made one. All are bound together in the Spirit of Christ.

We place their photos around the altar of the Eucharist – which is a word which means ‘thanksgiving’ - because, even through our tears, we want to say to God, “thank you for their lives, and for their love.”

We place their photos around the altar as a way of proclaiming with Christian boldness: **we remember.**

Remember. You may have noticed that the word “remember” was found in all three of our scripture passages tonight.

In the Book of Lamentations, there are *two* things that get remembered. The person who is praying in this passage is heartbroken. And they are honest with God about their sadness.

As the person prays in the book of Lamentations, they remember how life used to be, with its blessings, and the people who blessed us. But now they are lost, and gone. So the heartbroken person tells God, “I am deprived of peace. I can’t find hope. My future seems lost. Sometimes, remembering brings tears, and honesty.

But even as this person pours out their sadness to God, they decide – yes, *decide* – to remember something else. “I will call this to mind,” they say. And what do they call to mind? They remember all of the ways that God blessed them in the past. All of the times in the past when they were heartbroken. All those moments God got them through the hard times and did not abandon them.

They choose to remember – ***God has been with me in the past.*** So they can choose to believe – ***God is with me now.***

Memory, read through the lens of gratitude, leads to hope.

In the 2nd letter to Timothy, Paul begins with this sentence: “Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead.” That’s it. That’s the core of his preaching. *Jesus*, who was born, like us; and lived, like us; and loved, like us.

Remember Jesus, who died, like us; and was buried like us.

And keep remembering Jesus... raised from the dead. Why was he raised? So that he could lead us home, to the risen life proclaimed by an empty tomb. His death gives our death its meaning. His resurrection gives us the path to life eternal. Remember Jesus, raised from the dead. If he is not risen, then our faith is meaningless, and our hope is hopeless. Remember Jesus, raised from the dead.

There are times, in the scriptures, when we are called upon to remember. But, when all is said and done, human beings lose our capacities and abilities. So we need someone to remember for us. We need someone to remember us.

In tonight's Gospel reading, Jesus is bleeding from the cross, on the hill called Golgotha. To his right and left are two thieves, also dying by crucifixion. We don't know much about them. But one of them enters into a conversation with Jesus, a conversation which has been remembered for 2000 years.

One dying man on a cross turns and says, "Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom."

There are a couple of details about this sentence which often go unnoticed. The first detail is this: this is the only time, in any of the Gospels, where someone calls Jesus simply by his first name. In every other part of every other Gospel, when someone speaks to Jesus, they add some other title to his name. They might call him "Jesus of Nazareth," or "Jesus the Christ," or "Rabbi" or Jesus, son of David."

But only this thief, dying next to Jesus, has the audacity to simply call him "Jesus." Is that because, when we are suffering, all of our titles and achievements mean nothing? Or is it a lesson which says to each of us: remember, when you have nothing left, when mortality is taking everything else away from you, the one thing you'll have left is that one name: *Jesus*.

And notice another detail: the dying thief does not ask Jesus to heal him. He doesn't say to Jesus, "get us down from these crosses." He doesn't say, "I'm too young to die, so fix it so we don't die." He doesn't say to Jesus, "punish these soldiers and get us out of here."

The only thing he asks of Jesus is this: *remember me*. "Jesus, remember me..."

Maybe this bleeding thief on the cross next to Jesus is telling us what we need most to hear. Maybe he's telling us that, in the end, to be remembered by Jesus is the only remembering that matters. In fact, to be remembered by Jesus is the only thing that matters, period.

Because, to be remembered by Jesus is to be remembered by the one who is eternal. So if I am lovingly remembered by Jesus the Risen One, then I will rise. If I am remembered by the eternal one, if I am in his heart and mind, then I will be eternal too.

Your loved ones are remembered by the Risen One. They are held, gently, lovingly, in the mind and heart and hands of God. They are healed, they are whole, they are holy. And even if everyone else forgets, even if the world forgets, they (and we) are not forgotten. We are remembered, by the One who knew us before we were born.

On All Souls Day, candles pierce the darkness. On All Souls Day, tears become the holy water which makes this place holy. On All Souls Day, photographed faces invite us to remember, to remember for as long as we can.

Those faces surround a table, a table (an altar) which connects our deepest hungers to our home in heaven. And every person who has ever prayed, “Jesus, remember me...” knows that Jesus never forgets. He does not forget them. He will not forget you.

He does not forget. He invites us home, to the feasting of eternity, where he is the host and we see him face to face. By God’s grace, I pray that, someday, I will sit down next to mummy at the banquet of heaven. And when I do, she will smile at me and say, “I remember you.”

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