

Heaven is the memory of God
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Matthew 10: 24-39

Corey and Brian were married on the beach under a full moon this week. The palm trees swayed gently in rhythm with the tiki lamp's flames. It was an unremarkable event if you use scales that measure weddings by number of guests, fame or fortune. It will not appear in a Newspaper and even as the couple left the resort, the hotel was beginning preparations for the next wedding. In the opinion of the 25 guests though, the wedding was special and unforgettable. It was our family's wedding, my sister's youngest girl whose heart, mind and life has been a gift. I presided at the ceremony, Marcus, Levi and Caney sang three part harmony to "Stir it Up", and Moses was the ring bearer. It brought tears to all our eyes to watch her exchange vows because of our deep love and pride. She was a beautiful bride. When it was over she picked up the extra programs, collected the lyrics and notes from the wedding, and said this week she is pressing flowers and printing pictures. She doesn't want anything to be forgotten in preserving this momentous day that will forever change our family tree.

The next day we strolled through Key West and took a tour of Ernest Hemingway's Home. Key West has claimed the famous writer as their own and preserved everything from books he once read to random pictures of him as a younger man with friends. His life in the hallowed halls of preservation feels sacred. All of his possessions are valuable because they are attached to him. It's all sealed behind glass and roped off so we can keep his memory alive for the sake of history.

Like a family wedding, or the belongings of famous people, we are valuable to God as part of creation. This Gospel reminds us that we are not forgotten: we will be remembered by God. When I think of what heaven is like I am silenced. I have never been about to synthesize God's love for all humanity with a formula for salvation offered by a faith tradition. Part of my issue is that I was raised by a faithful mother who used to say she would be dirt when she died and that was a useful thing to become. Part of it is that I am a student of theology and know that we can't dismiss scriptures because we struggle with them. Instead we keep studying and reflecting how they are part of God's tapestry unfolding through words, revelation and tradition. In applying these truths we are called to surrender our lives to God, follow the path of our teacher and Lord whom we will never surpass, and proclaim without fear the truth of the Gospel. We are to trust our whole lives to God including that God will carry us into the eternal side of time. Beyond that Matthew 10 provides a glimpse of what heaven must be. It says that God loves the sparrows, the most common bird we know and knows when they fall. God loves humanity so intimately that God even knows the hairs on our heads. So we do not have to ever be afraid that when we die, we are known. We are more valuable than a sparrow and will never be forgotten by God. Heaven is the memory of God. We are preserved in the memory of Love that is big enough to contain all creation for all time. No one is

forgotten, because everyone is beloved. God's love is deep enough to hold the memory of all our lives.

This Gospel is part of the commissioning and instructions for the disciples. He is not saying this to scare or deflate them, but to give them courage and strength in the faces of troubles coming. He is sending them out like sheep to meet the wolves and so they need to understand their power when they face people with wealth, title, and who can kill them with an order. "Don't be afraid", he says, they can't touch what God has made in you. It will not be peaceful and people will be divided and anyone who loves anything more than me is not worthy of this truth. This Gospel is written to encourage us on our path to go out and face any opposition with the truth that nothing can touch the truth of god's love for us or erase us from the memory of god. Jesus told them this in hushed tones for their ears alone. They went out with enough conviction to preach it from pulpits and streets and face unimaginable consequences.

Our best efforts at holding memory are slender threads in the span of time. Not only are we dust, but even our memory is dust in this world. I can imagine someday Corey and Brian's great-grandchildren trying to recall the names of the couple in the faded photograph in the back of their grandfather's drawer. I can imagine the words on the books vanishing off the pages in a few hundred years. Even our own memories are not our own, they are as fragile as the neurons that carry them. My mother's memory literally turned to a sponge twelve years ago as she was dying. When she died she couldn't remember the name of a soul on this earth. I know that many of us have seen the memory of patients, friends, and family fade. That a person we love doesn't even get to remember that we love them seems particularly cruel and humbling. The Very Rev. Henry Chadwick died this month in Oxford England at the age of 87. He was an authority on the past and said during the Synod of 1988 that "nothing is sadder than someone who has lost his memory." But just because we lose the memory, doesn't mean the memory is forgotten. Even the Jane and John Doe's that no one could name when they die buried out in the potter's field are not lost to God. My mother sold herself short in her beliefs. Our bodies do become dirt to be sure, but our souls live. They live in the memory of God and I have seen my mother spirit in hawks and dreams and felt her living presence for years. She is part of God. While we will never know the mind of God, we can know what it is like to be remembered by God. It gives us peace and courage in this world, and hope in heaven. It is wider and deeper than any memory we have ever held.