



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Watertown, WI

“Unforgettable”

Rev. David K. Groth

“Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has born? Though she may forget, I will never forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands” (Isaiah 49:15-16a).

Mother’s Day

Seventh Sunday of Easter

May 12, 2013

Collect of the Day

O King of glory, Lord of hosts, uplifted in triumph far above all heavens, leave us not without consolation but send us the Spirit of truth whom You promised from the Father; for You live and reign with Him and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

The problem for preachers this morning is that Mother's Day is not on the liturgical calendar. It's not an official church festival . . . at all. In fact, the church officially ignores it. My homiletics professor at the seminary went on a rant about secular holidays. "January 1st is not about the New Year" he said, with an edge of anger. "It's about the Circumcision of Our Lord." "And Mother's Day is not a religious holiday" he continued. "It is a product of Hallmark, FTD florists, and restaurant owners. It is another example of how the culture invades and takes over the church. The faithful thing to do is to ignore it. Maybe throw in a prayer, but don't you preach on it."

So for the first few years of ministry I mostly ignored Mother's Day, which probably was a mistake because there are a lot of people are in church today *because* it is Mother's Day. Every one of us has a mother, and we're thinking about her today. And some have plans. I even had a guy tell me the week before, "Rev . . . I'm bringing my mom to church next week. Make it a good one." So here goes . . . an attempt to be relevant.

Our text is from the book of Isaiah. In Isaiah, God is warning his people that their sin would bring disaster on them at the hands of the Babylonians. Jerusalem would be sacked, the temple burned to the ground, and the leaders of society taken into captivity. Imagine, if all your life you grew up knowing you were part of God's chosen people, being told that God would never abandon his covenant with you . . . imagine then seeing your nation overrun by the vastly superior forces of the enemy. It would not only be a national tragedy. It would also stir up a theological crisis. How can this be

happening to God's chosen people? If God is almighty, and God is on our side, then why is this happening? Does it mean that God is cancelling his covenant with us? Worse yet, does it mean he will no longer remember us? That's precisely what the people are thinking. Verse 14: "Zion said, 'The Lord has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me.'"

The Lord responds to these fears with some of the most poignant words in Scripture. "Can a woman forget the baby at her breast, or show no compassion for the child she has born?" The answer is, "Of course not!" When it does happen, (for example, when a mother forgets her child at the McDonald's Playland) it makes the news. It so rare that it's newsworthy. So the point is, even if the unthinkable happens (like your nation is overrun, or a mother forgets her child. . .) even if the unthinkable happens God will never forget his own.

"Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands." At the time, it was common for a slave owner to engrave his name on his slaves. Here, something like the reverse of that is happening where God engraves us onto the palms of his hands. Sometimes I see people who write reminders to themselves on their hands. God engraves you on to his. That's how far God will go to remember his people and keep his covenant.

Have you ever seen the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C.? It is subtle. It is elegant. And it is heart-wrenching. The polished black granite emerges from the earth on one side in an elongated triangle and seems to disappear on the other. There are 58,267 names engraved on it, arranged in the order in which they died – by date. No information of rank is given. About 40,000 of those listed on the wall were just 22 or younger. Here and there people are searching for a name, and when they find it, sometimes they lovingly trace it with their fingers, or they make an impression of it with paper and pencil, or they simply light a candle and place it at its base. Over the years I'm sure there

have been many, many powerful moments when a mother visited the memorial, found the name, and remembered her son.

Can a mother forget her child? Not likely. Even less so will the Lord ever forget his own. “Behold I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.”

Some translations use the word “inscribed” here, or even “written.” “I have written you onto the palms of my hands.” That’s not strong enough. This is not the writing of a ballpoint pen. This is no pin prick or paper cut. This is the same word used to convey the act of cutting a tomb out of a hillside (Is. 22:16)! Therefore scholars say “Engraved” is much more accurate. It’s very much like those names engraved into the Vietnam Memorial. But when engraved into the Lord’s hands, it is far more permanent than just granite. The point is God will not forget you. Indeed he cannot. You are engraved on his hand.

Do you deserve to be there? Certainly God’s ancient people didn’t deserve it. Every chance they got, they ignored his commands. Each did what was right in his own eyes. And how they grumbled! One example: when they got hungry, they cried out to God like a two-year old with an actionable diaper rash. So God rains down manna for them. For a time they are satisfied, even a little grateful for this bread of life. But soon they grow weary of it. “We never see anything but this manna” they cry. And they long again for the food they ate as slaves. “If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost – also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic.” They make slavery in ancient Egypt sound like a cost free Mother’s Day Brunch. Memory plays tricks on us like that.

It would get worse. They would forget the Lord and dance around their golden bulls and fire up incense before their idols. At one point God says to Moses, “I have had enough of these people! They’re wicked! I cannot stomach them any longer. I will destroy them,

and then, Moses, I will create a new family through your descendants!” (Ex. 32:9-10). The people have no idea this conversation is happening, that God wants to forget them. They have no idea they’re within an inch of destruction.

Moses intervenes for them. “No, God. You brought them this far. Don’t forget. Don’t forget your promises to them.” And so God forgives them, and remembers not to forget his eternal promise given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Ex. 32:11-14).

Do you think God ever becomes that impatient with us, his people today? I’m talking about your sin now, your deliberate rebellion and mine, our intentional amnesia of his commands, how we dance around our own golden bulls, in whatever form they are and however it is that we dance. Could it be that there are times when God wants to forget us? Could it be we are sometimes within an inch of our own destruction, and without a clue?

Last year Lance Armstrong was officially stripped of his titles in cycling for having used performance enhancing drugs. So gone are his seven Tour de France wins and gone are many other victories in many other races and now they’re wanting him to return the prize money. He has been banned from competitive cycling for the duration of his life. Many of his sponsors (including Trek) have dumped him. His own foundation (Livestrong) is distancing itself from him. Of course many have had harsh words to say about him. The president of the International Cycling Union said, “Lance Armstrong has no place in cycling, he deserves to be forgotten in cycling” (WSJ, Oct. 23, 2012). Did you hear it? “He deserves to be forgotten.” Those are among the most severe words that could be said of anyone. That said do we deserve to be forgotten? Probably so, but thanks be to God for his gracious memory! I’m counting on that memory of his . . . I’m counting on him to forget the things I’ve done and to remember his gracious promises to me instead. I’m counting on that for myself, and for everyone I know.

I’m thinking of some of our children now, our collective children, made also to be God’s children in Holy Baptism. But in all their sophistication and wisdom and

education, they sometimes forget. They forget who they are. We pray for our children who forget. We lie in bed in the middle of the night and pray in the quiet darkness that they will soon remember their roots, their values, and the Christian faith. We pray that they do not forget their Lord, the Rock from which they've been hewn. But whether they remember or forget, our greater comfort is that God knows them. God does not forsake them. And he will not forget them . . . ever. Indeed he cannot. He has them engraved on his palms.

For us all trouble comes in one form or another: serious illness, tragic accident, loss of relationship, loss of income, loss of job and meaning and purpose. Sooner or later trouble comes and every one of us can understand how those exiled people were feeling when they said, "The Lord has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me."

That especially is the time to dust off these ancient words, these two thousand seven hundred year old words: "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast, or show no compassion to the child she has born? Even these may forget, but I will never forget you!"

It's hard to imagine anything more tenacious, more fiercely devoted, than the love of a mother for her infant. Garrison Keillor wrote, "You could come home with snakes tattooed on your face and she would still see the good in you. She knows when you're in trouble. And you will get into deep trouble some day. Count on it. But your mother will still love you. Like an old lioness, she'll come running, even if you're 2,000 miles away." Keillor concluded, "Buy her something nice, like a set of gold ingots. Or a black car with a chauffeur. At least write a note" he says (Chicago Tribune, 8 May 2008).

No human love can be perfect, but parental love is probably the best metaphor we have for the perfect love of God. And so God's Word taps into it frequently, with pictures of God as a father running down the lane to welcome a wandering prodigal son home again, God as a woman turning her household inside out searching for one lost coin, God as a mother hen, gathering her chicks

under her wings.

Again, it's hard to imagine anything more tenacious and more fiercely devoted than the love of a mother for her infant. But, there is one thing : the love of God for you in Jesus Christ.

“Can a woman forget the child at her breast? Though she may forget, I will never forget you. See, I have engraved you onto the palms of my hands.” Amen.

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