

The Cure for Amnesia  
Nathan J.A. Humphrey  
Corpus Christi  
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I Corinthians 11:23-36; Luke 22:14-30

Tomorrow, I'm flying to Southern California to visit family and friends, and most especially my father, whom I have not seen in person since February, 2019. As many of you know, he is in memory care in a nursing home in Anaheim. He suffers from dementia, and at this point is nonverbal. We have no idea whether he will even remember who I am.

To be honest, I am dreading this encounter. Will I be a stranger to the man who brought me into this world? Thinking about the vagaries of memory and love reminded me of a sermon I preached two decades ago on Maundy Thursday entitled "The Cure for Amnesia". Amnesia and dementia are not the same thing, but their emotional impact on both the one who suffers the condition and their loved ones can look pretty similar.

My sermon was inspired by a case study on amnesia in a book by the neurologist Oliver Sacks, entitled, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales*. Most of us are familiar with amnesia through cartoons and soap operas. Amnesia is usually portrayed as a sort of comic or melodramatic loss of memory: Bugs Bunny whacks Elmer Fudd on the head with a mallet, and he forgets who he is for twelve hilarious minutes, until an anvil falls on him, and miraculously, his memory returns. In soap operas, amnesia is often used as a desperate plot device when the writers have run out of good ideas.

Such are the popular, and often funny, associations we have with the word "amnesia." Dementia, on the other hand, isn't usually a laughing matter, though Canadian comedian Gavin Crawford has just started a podcast on CBC called "Let's Not Be Kidding", wherein he shares both the sad and the funny parts of caring for his mother with Alzheimer's.

In his book, Dr. Sacks describes the much sadder case of Jimmie, who suffers from amnesia brought on by years of heavy drinking. Jimmie's amnesia is so severe he must live in a nursing home, which happens to be run by an order of nuns. Dr. Sacks meets him there in 1975, when Jimmie is fifty years old, but Jimmie believes it's 1945 and says he hasn't turned twenty yet. Jimmie has absolutely no memory of the thirty years between 1945 and 1975, and he is incapable of creating or retaining new memories.

At one point, Dr. Sacks confronts Jimmie with his own reflection in a mirror, and Jimmie reacts with horror: "Is this a nightmare? Am I crazy? Is this a joke?" Two minutes later, Jimmie greets Dr. Sacks as if they're meeting for the first time. Episodes such as this one lead the good doctor to wonder whether Jimmie has a soul. Dr. Sacks writes:

"One tended to speak of him, instinctively, as a spiritual casualty—a 'lost soul': was it possible that he had really been 'de-souled' by a disease? 'Do you think he has a soul?' I once asked the Sisters. They were outraged by my question, but could see why I asked it. 'Watch Jimmie in chapel,' they said, 'and judge for yourself.'

I did, and I was moved, profoundly moved and impressed, because I saw here an intensity and steadiness of attention and concentration that I had never seen before

in him or conceived him capable of. I watched him kneel and take the Sacrament on his tongue, and could not doubt the fullness and totality of Communion, the perfect alignment of his spirit with the spirit of the Mass. Fully, intensely, quietly, in the quietude of absolute concentration and attention, he entered and partook of the Holy Communion. He was wholly held, absorbed, by a feeling. There was no forgetting, no [amnesia] then, nor did it seem possible or imaginable that there should be; for he was no longer at the mercy of a faulty and fallible mechanism—that of meaningless sequences and memory traces—but was absorbed in an act, an act of his whole being, which carried feeling and meaning in an organic continuity and unity, a continuity and unity so seamless it could not permit any break.”

Sacks concludes, “Clearly Jimmie found himself, found continuity and reality, in the absoluteness of spiritual attention and act. The Sisters were right—he did find his soul here.”

In the Eucharist, Jimmie finds the cure for his amnesia—not in a miraculous healing of his body, but in a *cure* that restores his human dignity and reveals the depths of soul that lie unplumbed at the core of his being. In a way, I believe that Jimmie’s case is merely a more advanced state of our own amnesia. We all forget from time to time what makes life meaningful. I also believe that the same cure for this kind of forgetfulness and neglectfulness on our part is to be found where Jimmie found it: in the Eucharist.

Who knew that in the Eucharist we would find the cure for amnesia? But that’s exactly what the Eucharist is. A few verses beyond the end of today’s Epistle, Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”

When Paul wrote these words of Christ to the Corinthians, he used the Greek language. The word for “remember” in Greek is “anamnesia,” the exact opposite of amnesia. We could call remembrance “un-amnesia.” So when I read Dr. Sacks’ account of Jimmie’s encounter with the Eucharist, I had to wonder whether Dr. Sacks realized that “Do this in remembrance of me” was “Do this in un-amnesia of me.”

If we think of the Eucharist as the cure for amnesia, we are led inexorably to ask: What does our remembrance of Christ in the Eucharist actually *do*? Well, first off, memory makes the thing remembered present. When we remember Christ, we ask for his presence among us. “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am also,” Jesus said, and to be gathered together in Christ’s name is to remember Christ. I am reminded of the Gospel story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. They do not recognize Jesus, they do not *remember* Jesus, until he breaks bread with them. Until they participate in the Eucharist of the Risen Lord, they are amnesiacs. But Christ’s Presence in the breaking of the bread cures them through un-amnesia, remembrance. When Christ says “there I am also,” he means he is present not merely in mind and heart, but in *reality*. So too, Christ has a “Real Presence” in the Church when we gather together in Christ’s name, especially in the celebration of the Eucharist.

Now, this would be a lecture on psychology and not a homily if I were to offer up the view that our remembrance of Christ only makes Christ metaphorically present, “as if” he were here when we remember him. For we have all had, perhaps, moments of sentimental reminiscence, when we remember fondly how a loved one used to be: We see Grandpa’s old recliner and remember vividly, if only for a moment, all the heroic stories he would tell about the war, or we step back into our second-grade classroom and remember what a strict disciplinarian Mrs. Obenaus was, and for a moment we can even feel her pulling painfully at our earlobes! Reminiscence, however, is not the same as remembrance.

For there is something about the Eucharist that makes Christ’s presence in and among us more than metaphorical, more than sentimental, more than merely psychological. And this something is the Holy Spirit. We remember Christ’s Body broken for us in the Eucharist so that the Holy Spirit may, through that broken Body, re-member, reconstitute us, as the Body of Christ present in the world. In short, when we receive the Body of Christ, we become the Body of Christ. This is not a psychological truth, not a metaphorical truth, but a truth of God’s Presence in, among, and through us. We are mysteriously brought into the life and work of Christ by being re-membered as his Body.

Debates about the nature of the Eucharist have raged for centuries. But one thing we tend to forget in all of these debates is that the Eucharist is not a thing but an act. As the Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann has put it, “Remembrance is an act of love. God remembers us and His remembrance, His love, is the foundation of the world. In Christ, we remember. We become again beings open to love, and we remember. The Eucharist is the sacrament of cosmic remembrance: it is indeed a restoration of love as the very life of the world.”

Amnesia is a terrible thing not because it erases the past, but because it does not hold out any possibility of a future, or even a present. We experience memory in the present. And this experience of present memory enables us to have a future, to build a future, as well as to learn from our past. Without memory, community is impossible, but in the Eucharist, our memory of Christ is a memory not merely of past events, but of the promise of a future for the community of the Church. For when we remember Christ’s death, we also remember his resurrection. And when we remember his resurrection, we also remember his coming again in glory, and are thereby equipped to do the work he has given us to do in this present age, now and in the future.

On this great feast of Corpus Christi, we have gathered to remember, and to prepare for still further remembering. What strange amnesiacs we are, who need to be reminded to remember! But we have the cure for our amnesia in the Eucharist, in the Real Presence of the Body of Christ, which makes us a part of his Body. The remembrance, or un-amnesia, of the Body of Christ, is the cure for amnesia.

So, this Corpus Christi, remember to take your medicine.