

Memory as Ministry in the Age of Alzheimer's

Biblical ministry is not limited to the ordained ministry. Based on the "priesthood of believers," all Christians are called to minister.

Marketplace ministry, social justice and charitable work are examples of such ministries. But have you heard of a ministry called "memory?"

It appears that there is a legitimate ministry that can be called "remembering." In this age of great concern about the increasing number of people being afflicted with Alzheimer's disease, which profoundly affects memory, I consider this a sobering revelation.

The Bible speaks much about God and man in relation to memory and remembrance. God remembers His covenant (Ex. 6:5). He does not remember our forgiven sins (Is. 43:25), but remembers righteous individuals—both men and women. Noah, Abraham and Hannah are examples.

We are told not to forget God's dealings with us, but to remember them, and to pass on the memory to a new generation (Deut. 11:19). Israel was instructed not to forget that they were slaves in Egypt (Deut. 16: 12), and to remember the Sabbath (Ex. 20:8). The psalmist instructs us not to forget "all His benefits" (Ps. 34:2).

Memory is at the heart of Christian theology. The undisputed instruction of Jesus on the night in which He was betrayed was to "do this in remembrance of me." The ordinances of the most independent faith groups are built on remembrance! Noticeably, theologian Henri Nouwen defined ministry as being a living reminder of Jesus.

Memory is a matter of great interest and special concern to Saint Paul. He tells us to remember Jesus (2 Tim. 2: 8). He instructs further: Remember the poor (Gal. 2:10); "Remember my chains," (Col. 4:18). The author of Hebrews adds: "Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering" (Heb. 13:3). "Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you" (Heb. 13:7).

In Paul's writings, the ministry of memory is strongly related to prayer. "We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith" (1 Thess. 1:3). "I constantly remember you in my prayers" (2 Tim. 1:3). "I thank my God every time I remember you" (Phil. 1:3). "I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers" (Eph. 1:16). "I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers" (Philem. 1:4).

What a powerful ministry! Anyone with the ability to remember can do this ministry. There are no geographical limitations! Words may not even be needed for this ministry. Believers of all nations, tribes and tongues can engage in this ministry of memory and remembrance, a ministry in which we connect our memory of each other to God.

The ministry of memory is not only about those who are living. Certainly, the leaders we are expected to remember according to Hebrews 13:7 are not all alive. Some have finished their course and have gone to be with the Lord. They don't need our prayers, only our grateful memory.

As a person raised in a pastor's home in South India, I remember people outside my family who have touched my life in profound ways. Some of them are alive, others have finished their race. A Hindu woman was forced to give up her eyes to follow Jesus. A retired teacher found time to teach me English hymns. Church members shared their modest means with their pastor's kid. Preachers let me carry their Bibles. Classmates left an imprint on my life. The list is long.

A young cancer patient I visited three decades ago is also on my list. I was a chaplain at the City of Faith Hospital in Tulsa, Oklahoma, then. The patient was a born-again Christian who had no family members to visit her. Her mother and grandmother had died from the same disease, her father was dead, and she had no siblings. She lived alone and kept her sickness a secret as long as she could, due to fear. According to the doctors, the prognosis was not good because by the time she came to the hospital, the disease had progressed significantly.

One day she asked me during a pastoral visit, "I have no family left. I don't know how long I will live. Can I ask you for a favor?" Thinking that she would ask for some practical help, I said, "Of course, what can I do for you?" She asked, "Would you remember me once I am gone?" Moved by her unexpected request, I said, "Certainly. I will remember you." She thanked me.

I have seen many answers to prayers. I have witnessed both instant and gradual healings, but this was not the case with the young cancer patient. She passed away the following night.

There are times when all you can give others is your prayers and your memory! Sometimes God answers the prayers immediately. Other times, the answers come slowly. In some cases, the answer is not what one expects. In any case, we must pray, and we must remember.

The threat of Alzheimer's disease reminds us that memory is a gift. How wonderful it would be if all of us could use this gift as a means of ministry! {eo}

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