



May 29, 2016

Larry DeLong

What Do We Remember? – Luke 7:1-10

It's Memorial Day weekend – and Memorial Day gives us another important opportunity to recall and be thankful for people who acted according to their higher nature, their better selves – although far too many think of it as just another three-day holiday. It is a time to remember.

We need to remember. We need to remember because the past is what made us what we are, guides the future we work toward, and determines the choices we are able to make. Memories are important.

There are different kinds of memory. This weekend and this Scripture passage speak to me of three, which I'll call historical memory, personal memory, and habitual memory.

Historical memory is, well, history, events that affect us but which we didn't experience firsthand. So, on Memorial Day, we particularly remember those who died in service of our country. We are the future their sacrifice made possible, and we owe a debt of gratitude. This building we sit in and the church it houses are also bequests of history, and that history is a kind of memory.

Then there are events that happened to us, perhaps only once, which guide us: that is personal memory. Just the right word at the right time from a teacher; a grandparent's special act; even a poor choice. Once as a child with a chest cold, I stuck my foot through the bedrails and accidentally into an old-style hot water and Vick's Vapor Rub vaporizer. I do not stick my feet through bedrails. These personal memories carry the lessons we live by.

Then, there's a third sort of memory: events which taught lessons creating memories that created habits. Sounds complicated, but it is really simple. They're a part of who we are. Each of us has many of these, from the way you pick up a cup to the way you make your bed to whether or not you set the parking brake in your car every time you park, like my wife. You learned a behavior or a process, and it has become a part of you: habitual or instinctive memory.

Which brings us to this unique story about Jesus. There's lots of important detail in this passage, such as the fact that the local Jews held this Roman official in such high esteem – he's surely won their hearts and minds. That is remarkable. He's the enemy! Really, that centurion isn't just a symbol of the Roman occupation, he's literally the enforcer of its will. For those Jewish elders even to tolerate him is amazing, let alone that they were willing to plead to Jesus on his behalf. Oh, and why are they so willing? Another surprise: not only did he build them their synagogue, but this centurion, this Roman oppressor, "loves our

people.” Wow. The Jews here have strong, positive personal memories of this remarkable man!

The main point that’s traditionally taken away from this event is the humility and faith of the centurion. Before Jesus can reach his house to care for his servant, the centurion – a warrior, an official, a powerful and commanding person – sends a humble message to Jesus, telling him not to trouble to come, saying that he knew Jesus could do his work without even seeing the sick man.

And how did the centurion know this? Because he remembered. The centurion acts out of habitual memory. As he says in his message to Jesus, the centurion speaks, and his people get it done. And if the centurion can do that, well, certainly a great teacher and healer like Jesus can do even more. So, Jesus, just say the word, wherever you are; I know it will be obeyed.

Jesus is impressed. That is faith to be commended. It is faith that is trust in action.

That faith is powered by memory. The centurion is using his own experience, his habit, his personal expectation, as the foundation of his faith.

Here’s what I mean: the centurion knows how things work in his world: there are layers of authority, of which he is one, and they are

there to make sure things get done on every level. Obedience and trust make that work. Do it; it's done.

In his world, what he says goes. So, in Jesus' world – which the centurion rightly understands to be far more powerful – it must be even more so. Say the word, and it will happen!

What can we take from this approach to faith in practice? How do we help our memory support our faith? Scripture is clear that God is working among us all the time; our historical faith tells us that God is Lord of the universe, created all, knows what's happening, and is working out his grand plan in ways far too enormous and complicated for us to comprehend.

That grand historical context is a bit too big for most of us. We generally operate on the here and now and close to home. Think for a moment of one of our most cherished freedoms, bedrock of our nation, background of our daily lives: freedom of speech. We are proud that it is an American principle.

In principle. But then, someone says something outrageous, and... somewhere in the deep recesses of our minds, we wonder, "who let them say that?" Or, maybe, "how can they say that?," which at least assumes that civil discourse should have some sort of rules and people should filter their thoughts before they speak. But our nation values free speech, and so it gets complicated. I remember being astounded as my

Dad explained to me that you can't believe everything you read. Doesn't *someone* approve this stuff? If it's printed, it's got to be true, right? Still, we defend free speech, even if in practice it can be a bit uncomfortable sometimes. The big picture isn't so clear up close.

So, our big-picture historical faith teaches us much that *takes* faith to understand. And that's where personal faith comes in. Many have had the grace of an experience of God working in their life at some time, a memory that is precious and cherished. It's that piece that often helps us understand the whole, gives us personal context, a personal reference point to look at what we haven't experienced yet still believe - hopefully understand it better.

So, the historical is what you were given, the personal is what you personally know. The habitual is about how you live.

When you stub your toe or knock something over, what do you say? My parents had a man who worked for them who, in the office (where my Mom was present), would say, "Mercy!" (It was slightly different when we were out of her earshot.) I'm sometimes embarrassed by the unbidden exclamations that pop out when I'm surprised. But that response – what we habitually do when faced by a particular circumstance – is important. Stop the car, put it in park, put on the parking brake! Habit.

Where this meets our faith is here: how do we acknowledge God when we're confronted by something unexpected? How do you acknowledge God in that moment? Or do you?

This is the key to the faith of the centurion: his habitual memory of giving and following orders lets him trust that Jesus will do what is needed. That enables his great faith. It can grow ours, too, by growing habits of memory.

One way to look at this is what we do when we have prayer time in a group, and ask for people to offer up their thoughts, their concerns, and of course their thanksgivings. We quickly learn and fall into a beautiful habit: when someone voices a concern, we say, "Lord, hear our prayer;" when it's a joy or good news, we say, "Thanks be to God."

Do you, when someone tells you of a friend's illness, instinctively, habitually offer up a prayer? When something confronts you unexpectedly, is your first reaction despair, or prayer? When everything has turned out better than you could have imagined, do you habitually thank God?

What do you remember, in the moment? What do you do?

The centurion teaches us the value of making God, faith, our instinctive, habitual go-to memory. The goal is to make the faithful habit of turning to God our first response to whatever happens. And you do that, well, by *doing it*. Doing it until it becomes habit.

Every time I see our nation's flag and hear the national anthem there's a tug at my heart; I remember. It's habitual memory of thanks. May we grow so used to turning to God at every joy and challenge that our faith is as matter-of-fact and sure as the centurion's – and Christ's – word.

What do you remember? Remember to invite God into every moment – and the more you do, the more your faith will become your habit of life.