

God's Tattoo

*A Sermon On:
Psalm 139*

PREPARED BY
KEN GEHRELS
PASTOR
CALVIN CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH
NEPEAN, ONTARIO

It happens to all of us - in a place and time we never expect it suddenly we encounter someone from the past. The face is familiar, at least a little bit. Their voice is an echo we've heard before.

But from where?

And what in the world is their name?

Only a fleeting memory is left. The link is forgotten. The connections gone. Any warmth of relationship has long since cooled into ashes of the past. Not because of malice or anything. It just happened. The busyness of life took up our energy. Events and persons more recent occupy our memories and fill our relationship slots. We draw support and warmth from other sources now.

That sort of thing is nothing to feel bad about. We all experience it - either in ourselves or in those we meet. Some of us suffer more from it than others. But its there. Just a fact of life.

Memories fade.

We forget.

Hey - forgetfulness isn't just something about relationships, is it?

I went hunting for my car keys the other day. Looked all over the house until it finally dawned on me that I was holding the dumb things in my hand the whole time.

How many of you have done something similar with your glasses?

What are your experiences?

- forgot your wife's birthday or your anniversary?
- or that you'd promised to take the kids somewhere?
- the major term paper deadline overlooked till the prof asks for it?

Someone shared with me recently how he had an important function to attend. Was getting dressed to go when he noticed that his tie seemed somewhat short. So he undid the knot in order to make it longer. And guess what he forgot?

..... how to retie the thing!

When we're young sometimes we try to get around this forgetfulness thing by writing things on our hand. You've all done it, haven't you? Pages to read, phone numbers, shopping lists.

Some people do this in a more permanent way.

Something I would never recommend, but they get a tattoo. For a few folk it becomes a whole art form and method of expression and their entire back or elsewhere is covered with ink-based artwork injected right into the skin. Many people who get tattoos just put a certain symbol somewhere that reminds them of someone or someplace special.

A cupid with the name "Rosie" or "Mom" - whatever.

There until the day they die.

A permanent reminder that they have an everlasting place in the heart.

Of course, what happens if things fall out of sorts with Rosie? Then what do you do?

Perhaps what the sailor did in Norman Rockwell's famous plate.

[show the overhead]

Ah - what an odd lot we human beings are!

With what limited memories.

Against that background I'd invite you to join in reading a wonderful message from God's Holy Word.

PSALM 139:1-12, P.577

I read this, in part, as a tribute to Calvin's oldest member, who recently passed away. Patricia loved to hear this Psalm. Again, and again. As do so many others in our congregation.

For it is a Psalm that speaks to our fears of forgetting. Not so much about **being** forgetful, as it is about being **forgotten**.

While perhaps there is a bit of embarrassment in having a brain fizz moment when meeting someone from the past, life goes on and we carry on. There is no real consequence to that moment of "dumb-ness." We may well even soon forget about being forgetful!

But what about the person on the other end?

See, then it becomes personal.

I

have been forgotten.

There is no moment so difficult for a child as when the parent forgets. Perhaps through the tragedy of Alzheimer's. They become confused for a grandparent, or some other late relative. It is as if they themselves are no longer there. And **that** is as hard as anything to bear!

For younger children there can be the challenge of a parent who, for whatever reason, seems to be absent. Perhaps the fact isn't there, but certainly the appearance of not being around, not caring, maybe not even remembering that the child exists.

Psalm 139 says it about as clearly and directly - God **NEVER** forgets His people.

We are always in his view.

Always in his care.

Always within reach.

Always.

Everywhere.

In the sunshiny, joy-filled days.

And in the seasons of deep pain or sorrow.

He never forgets.

He never abandons.

In that context, then, I'd also like to read words that affirm what David's words in Psalm 139 first proclaimed. These, now, are the words of the prophet Isaiah, years later.

Through his mouthpiece, God makes an equally strong and direct statement to His people. And, like Psalm 139, it is a huge statement of divine love and eternal devotion.

ISAIAH 49.13-16 p.679

The first people to hear these words were people feeling a little, perhaps, like Rockwell's Sadie, Rosietta, Ming Fu, Mimi, Olga, and Sing Le. That while at one time they had possibly been the object of intense love, now they were forgotten.

The nation of Israel had been brought from infancy in Egypt, out of slavery, through some excruciatingly difficult years in the Sinai wilderness, and into Palestine. The land became a secure home, a safe space – a space given them by God.

Things were far from that way now, however.

Israel had engaged in continual spiritual adultery with one idol seductress after another. Forgetting Him. And to shake them back to their sense the Lord had to evict them from the Promised Land. Jerusalem was destroyed. Villages torched. The people taken into captivity.

The shock was enormous.

A wake up call? Absolutely – and every ounce of it needed, for the people were closer to being in a spiritual coma than being spiritually asleep.

But it did the trick.

As they come to and realize what has happened they responded the way a foolish adulterer does when his spouse has packed up and moved out along with the kids – *“Oh man, what have I done? What a fool I am.”*
 Their own fault or not, bottom line is that now they're all alone.
 The riches of the relationship - gone.
 The future - slate grey bleakness.

Yes - Just forget it - it's over.

And to these forsaken, dejected, hopeless people with heavy hearts and sagging spirits comes an amazing word from God -
 - an incredible love poem from divine lips! The words we read together.

I will NOT forget you!!

And the image of a mother is used.

Sure, sometimes there is estrangement in families. Tragic, but real. Yet even in circumstances like that, when thousands of miles may separate mother and child, there are very few mothers who can erase the picture of their child's face from their memory. The bond is too strong.

This is one she carried; birthed; nursed.
 Forget?
 NEVER!

Estranged children know that if they have been separated from their family they generally stand a better chance of reconciling if they go through Mom. Bonds tend to be stronger there.

And that picture of maternal bonding, says God, is how it is between me and you, believer!

Of course there is always someone to raise an exception:

A mother that is mentally unstable.
 A aged woman suffering from Alzheimer's.

And it's as if Holy God anticipates that with the second part of His love poem;
 the part about the tattoo.

I have your named carved right here on the palm of my hand.

A holy tattoo!
 And unlike Rockwell's sailor man, this one is for keeps.
 No line to be drawn through your name.
“Your walls are ever before me.”

That was God's promise to Israel, even in their turbulent times.
 It remains His promise for us today.

A promise that we need to go back to time and again.

For there are the seasons in our lives where we feel as though the whole world is lined up against us,
 as though we are left to move forward alone and every step is through thick, waist deep mud.
 where we call out and are convinced that no one answers.

It happens when we stand at a grave side.

We experience it in the middle of the night while lying in a hospital bed.
 It overwhelms while on the bus to that dead end job we can't break free from.
 When we're wrestling with depression.

Or when everyone else is invited to the party and we're left home alone.
“I'm forgotten.”

And in the deep moments the sense seems almost overpowering that even God has deliberately turned His back, or become distracted, or just plain forgotten.

"My child - you're right here.
 Your name is tattooed on my hand.
 Your face is etched in my mind.
 Your parents may get old and not remember your name.
 But I, the Ancient Of Days remain the same yesterday, today and forever.
 I will never forget you.
 Your friends may wander off in new life directions and your relationship fade
 but surely, I will be with you always.
 Those around may become distracted by problems and challenges of their own
 but no mountain is too high or valley too low that you will be beyond me"

Tonight I want to draw your attention to the tattoo on God's hand.
 Only, please understand that it looks very different than that which the artist is embedding into the arm of
 Rockwell's sailor.

God's tattoo is a bloody one. No letters. It is in the form of a nail scar.
 A nail scar on the palm of His one and only, His beloved son.

It is the tattoo imaged in Holy Communion.

Romans 5.8 says that God demonstrated His own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

On the cross.
 Our sins on His shoulders.
 So that estrangement from our Heavenly Home would never occur.
 So that our place with our Holy God would be forever assured.

Romans 8.34 says that Jesus is in heaven at the right hand of the Father, interceding -- praying -- for us.

Think of that – your name and well-being raised day after day after day by Jesus before the Heavenly Father.

No - **never** forgotten!!

Our names, our faces, our well-being – never forgotten.

But our sins – the slip-ups, half-truths, blow-ups, short falls, moral lapses, rebellious moments, frustrating errors and deviant chapters.....

Look at the table.

See the bread.

And the cup.

And remember that -

The times when **we** forget God;
 The times when **we** turn our back on Him;
 The times when **we** become distracted and preoccupied by nonsense and worthless matters;
 The times when **our** faith fades;
These are the times that God forgets.

Oh - not that He doesn't actually remember them.

But in the way He plans, and in the way He treats us, and in His affection for us, and His care that surrounds us

-

- because of the nail-scar tattoo on the hands of His Holy Son He acts and loves and responds and feels **as though** these crazy, sinful chapters in our lives had never occurred!

Gone!

Forever gone from the eternal record!

Forever

Gone!

And God's Holy power
Forever
Present!

His love?
Forever
Round Us!

His hands?
Forever
Holding Us!

Perhaps that doesn't take away the pain of losing a loved one.
It still makes impending surgery a major hurdle to overcome.
Struggling with an inadequate job remains a challenge.

But we're
not
facing these times
or any other
alone.