

## Jeremiah 1:4-10

<sup>4</sup>Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,  
<sup>5</sup>"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,  
and before you were born I consecrated you;  
I appointed you a prophet to the nations."  
<sup>6</sup>Then I said, "Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a  
boy." <sup>7</sup>But the LORD said to me,  
"Do not say, 'I am only a boy';  
for you shall go to all to whom I send you,  
and you shall speak whatever I command you,  
<sup>8</sup>Do not be afraid of them,  
for I am with you to deliver you,  
says the LORD."  
<sup>9</sup>Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me,  
"Now I have put my words in your mouth."  
<sup>10</sup>See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,  
to pluck up and to pull down,  
to destroy and to overthrow,  
to build and to plant."

## 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

<sup>1</sup>If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy  
gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup>And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all  
mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but  
do not have love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup>If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over  
my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

<sup>4</sup>Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant <sup>5</sup>or rude. It  
does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup>it does not rejoice in  
wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. <sup>7</sup>It bears all things, believes all things, hopes  
all things, endures all things.

<sup>8</sup>Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues,  
they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. <sup>9</sup>For we know only in part,  
and we prophesy only in part; <sup>10</sup>but when the complete comes, the partial will come  
to an end. <sup>11</sup>When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned  
like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. <sup>12</sup>For now we see  
in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I  
will know fully, even as I have been fully known. <sup>13</sup>And now faith, hope, and love  
abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

## SERMON

These are words I think most of us have become most familiar with in the context of a wedding ceremony. To the point where I know more than a few folks who roll their eyes or snicker a little when they look at a bulletin and see “1 Corinthians 13” listed as the text for the day. In short, it’s become part of the vast wedding cliché. And I get that. Read sentimentally, or without plumbing the dept of this text, it really just seems like most couples are like, “well, it says ‘love’ a lot...so let’s read it at our wedding!” The verse, ironically enough, becomes something of a clanging symbol, a repetition of the word “love” without any meaning if the officiant doesn’t take a second to pause and point out the depth and weight of what’s actually being said.

It’ll surprise none of you that I won’t let this passage pass in a wedding without a little foray into the world of the church in Corinth.

Because, of course, the first thing we should learn is that this isn’t a text about marriage alone, or about romantic love, or candy and roses and white dresses and whatever else we lay on top of it. This is secondarily a story about how the members of a community—a family, a church, a group of friends—how we ought to love one another, friends, siblings, parents, children, and yes, spouses as well. But before that, Paul is writing about love, and if God is love, then this text is, very first and foremost about how God loves us. All the stuff we put into it—about ourselves and our love—it’s best to imagine that as a reflection of what God has taught us.

Think of it this way, God first shows us what love is—it’s patient and strong and bears all things and all that. And then we, like children copying the action of their parent in the mirror, tying a tie or putting on mascara or buttoning a jacket, attempt to do it ourselves, but far more imperfectly. Does that make sense?

That’s the more appropriate orientation to this text—it is first about God, and second about our emulation of this God who is love.

So, with that in mind, we’re going to do a little reflection today, just a short, barely scratch the surface sort of dive, on memory loss, and what it means to receive God’s love, and to love one another through such a challenging diagnosis. The topic for conversation makes me worried, not just that I might say the wrong thing, or an untrue thing, but that I might hurt one of you all in the process, because today’s topic is tender and painful, and deeply vulnerable for a lot of us, I suspect. I’m working hard to wrap my own head around a hard thing, and I might say something wrong, but I think this is more important to talk about than my own worry, so let’s dive in.

Memory loss, dementia, Alzheimer’s, Lewy Body disease, whatever name it goes by, whatever the diagnosis, it’s devastating for everyone involved and in all likelihood every person in this room has some connection to it. Statistics vary, but somewhere between 1 in 3 and 1 in 4 seniors in the United States will die with some form of dementia. It’s so common. My grandfather had advanced Alzheimer’s for the last years of his life, which felt

like a particularly cruel blow for a man who had spent his life as a professor at Oregon State. He was sharp and brilliant in his work, a really loving dad and devoted husband, and a fantastic grandpa. It felt like a desolation for all of us to watch that man seem to recede, as he forgot the details of his career, of daily living, and finally the name and person of his wife and children. Memory loss is hard because it is a diagnosis borne by both the patient and the caregivers, and family systems do not escape unchanged.

Someone described dementia as like the dust bowl of the Depression. "Just as the dust storms of [the time] had stolen the thin, rich topsoil from the farm(s), so [do] the quiet storms of Alzheimer's [sweep] away best thoughts from the landscape of memory. Nothing [can] grow or take root anymore in that barren place. And this drought would not end."<sup>1</sup> Oof, but also, honest. Right? A barren place, a place where new things do not grow.

Where is God in that? Where is God in the midst of devastation? In the midst of the barren? In the loss? How can God let this happen?

I read a lot of articles and theological reflections on memory loss this week. Some were beautiful, some were trite, all were heartbreaking. And two stories stuck with me. One was an offering of hope for the caregiver, and the other a hope for the one suffering. And I'd like to share them with you. Not as a panacea or an easy answer, but as one possible avenue for our reflection, in the midst of a topic I don't think any of us will fully grasp.

For the caregivers, I was reading a piece by a middle aged woman, a lifelong Presbyterian it happens. She and her husband actively cared for all 4 of their aging parents, all 4 of whom had some form of dementia or Alzheimer's. One after the other, like dominoes, they fell over an uninterrupted span of 10 years. 10 years of caregiving. And toward the middle, frayed beyond belief, feeling totally divorced from God, she went to her pastor. Looking for an answer, seeking to find God in the midst of unrelenting suffering and loss. She wanted the pastor to baptize the hard decisions she'd had to make, and to absolve her of the dark thoughts...like wondering if her own mother was better off dead. But rather than offer some easy comfort, this pastor instead harkened back to Moses. He reminded her of the burning bush, and that God said, "where you are standing is holy ground, so take off your shoes." At first, she was disappointed. It wasn't the answer she wanted, it wasn't comforting and it didn't provide an epiphany. But, years later, upon reflection, she wrote, "I had counted on someone, maybe [my pastor], to answer my question about God's place in this dread disease that afflicts both patient and caregiver, albeit in different ways. While in the moment, I was disappointed, I now know that no solace exists for a caregiver, no panacea for difficulties faced. I have still not heard adequate words of counsel or comfort for either an Alzheimer's patient or a caregiver. "I am so very sorry," is the only response I can imagine to one on an Alzheimer's journey."<sup>2</sup> She continues by reflecting on what it cost

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2014-06/presence-absence>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/susan-rava/god-and-alzheimers\\_b\\_4036569.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/susan-rava/god-and-alzheimers_b_4036569.html)

her family to do this work, and ends by saying, “We are not alone. We rejoice that together we trod this holy ground.” What is love, if it is not this?

It’s a hard hope here. But there’s something good in it. That as caregivers, memory loss presents our families with the opportunity to reflect God’s love in that hardest little bit of 1 Corinthians—love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Now, I am not saying that there is one right way of bearing up in love as a caregiver. There isn’t. I know it was right of my family to avail themselves of a memory care facility for my grandpa. We weren’t abandoning him there. We were utilizing a resource we were grateful to have, because we could not provide a house or the kind of constant care my grandpa needed to be safe. There are a host of resources, and while it is a tragedy that the financial stress of memory loss disorders means they are not equally available to all people, it is ok to avail ourselves of help and support. Bearing all things does not mean doing it all alone.

For caregivers, although it is a hard, and often cold comfort in the moment, there is a deep and beautiful hope that where we stand is, indeed, holy ground. And that in loving those who are losing their memories, we are learning to copy the actions of a God who knows and shows us that love bears all things. This is a durable hope.

And for the patients, there was a different hope. Again, it’s not happy necessarily, I’ll own that from the start, but I think it’s durable, which is what matters. My friend Kari is a pastor in Philadelphia, and she shared with me the story of visiting a couple from her church. The wife had recently begun forgetting words. Like, she would stare at a fruit on the counter and not be able to recall the word “orange.” This had led to a diagnosis of dementia. The couple knew what was coming, and they called their pastor for a visit. Kari expected to walk into the usual questions—why is this happening to me? Where is God in the midst of this? Why do bad things happen? But she was shocked by the concern this woman held most deeply. She said to Kari that forgetting a fruit hurts, because it’s a marker of something much deeper, but it’s also just a fruit. But then she turned and said, “what happens if I forget Jesus?” I wasn’t anywhere near this visit, and even sharing the story brings me to the edge of tears. “What if I forget Jesus?” What a gut punch. What a terrible thought. What a worry to carry. Kari took a second to collect herself from the shocking question, and then pointed out, while that to forget Jesus is a loss and painful prospect, the hope of our faith doesn’t lie in us remembering Jesus. The hope never lied there. Instead, the sturdiness of our faith derives from the fact that Jesus remembers us. Jesus remembers us when we are squishy little turnips as infants. Jesus remembers us in the crises of our midlife. Jesus remembers us in the ravages of old age...even when the decline of our bodies and our minds means that we cannot remember him. That Jesus remembers and knows and loves us—and that this is the direction of our faith. When we have forgotten everyone and everything, we, ourselves, are not forgotten. That nothing separates us from the love of God, as Paul notes in another letter.

I don’t think this is particularly comforting, in the sense that it makes us feel any better or happier. Honestly? Memory loss sucks. It’s a condition that wounds both patient and caregiver, family systems change in irreparable ways. It’s financially burdensome,

psychologically taxing, and spiritually draining. It's awful, and barren, and we should be honest about that.

But I do think there might be a hope here. It's tiny ...but it's sturdy. The hope remains that God remembers us. God loves us. And God is love, a love that is patient and kind, a love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. So when we stand on the dried out fields of dementia, I think we can trust that the place where we are standing is, in fact, holy ground, and that God is standing right there with us.