

I want to tell a story before I read this morning's first lesson. Gwen Richards remembers how her mother, Helen Ruth Huggins was the glue for their family. She was very popular among their relatives. But when she was in her early 60s, Huggins was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease.

Gwen Richards realized that her mother might have Alzheimer's when she started getting lost. Huggins had gone across the street to see a neighbor. When she left for home, she headed in the opposite direction instead. A neighbor found her and gave her a ride home. When Huggins knocked at the door, her worried daughter was there waiting for her. But Huggins had no recollection of what had happened. As her daughter Gwen Richards recalls, "even though she was physically there, she was lost."

That aspect of life with Alzheimer's still haunts Richards, especially now because recently she too has been diagnosed with the disease. Richards tried to tell her doctors that she had early-onset Alzheimer's, but they didn't believe her. They asked about Richards' work life and her relationship with her husband, and when she said both were fine, they told her not to worry.

According to Richards, "If people aren't looking for Alzheimer's, they won't see it." But two tests have now confirmed that she will begin to suffer more and more of the symptoms of Alzheimer's. Her memory will slowly fade away. And she knows it.

Her children, Richards said, concern her the most. She worries that they might go through the same heartache she went through with her mother and that they could get it themselves. She thinks about the grandchildren she might never see.

Losing one's memory is a painful thing to go through. It is painful when we see family members lose their memory; it is painful when we lose our memory. But this morning we are going to be reading a text about a moment in history when the people of God lost their memory.

The books in the Old Testament of Ezra and Nehemiah are separated in our Bible but they are actually one book describing one particular event in history. Ezra and Nehemiah are accounts of two people involved in the time that the Israelites or Jewish people were returning to their homeland after being held in captivity for several generations.

Israel had been defeated by the Babylonians and taken into captivity. Their capital city of Jerusalem including their temple had been destroyed and the people had been taken off into captivity. But then the Persians rose to power, defeated the Babylonians and under King Cyrus they allowed the Israelite slaves to return to Jerusalem. Ezra and Nehemiah record this return of the people to their grandparent's land.

I am first going to read from the first chapter of Nehemiah. Read Nehemiah 1.

Nehemiah is the cupbearer to the king and he is a builder. He uses his skills to help lead the Jewish people to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem. The Jewish people were fearful of future terrorist attacks and they needed a strong national defense. The wall around the city provided this national defense.

But the Jewish people needed something more than walls. They needed to remember why they existed. They needed to hear once again the Word of God to give them instructions and to give them a sense of purpose. Here we read in chapter 8 how Ezra helped to remind them of why they existed.

Read Nehemiah 8:1-12

Like the Jewish people on their return to Jerusalem, many of us in the Christian church have lost our memories of why we exist as well. In too many ways we have become a place which is focused mainly on preserving traditions instead of a place which is gathering to listen to instructions from God. We have become a place which is fearful of taking chances because we are overly concerned with losing what we already have.

And what do we have? We have a nice and comfortable building to gather in. We have a nice and comfortable faith that we can live out without having to do a whole lot. We have nice friends that sit near us in our places of worship. We have a nice organizational structure which keeps things all nice and clean and tidy. But as we focus on staying nice, as we focus on maintaining our institutions, as we focus on protecting stuff and relationships, as we focus on ourselves and our needs and our desires and our fears, we are becoming spiritually shallow and dead.

Willow Creek is a famous church outside of Chicago which set the standard in the 80s and 90s in how to do church. Bill Hybels sought to establish a church that was seeker sensitive and that reached out to the baby boomer generation. And he and the church were very successful. The church grew into thousands of people in worship on Sunday mornings.

But a couple of years ago, the leadership at Willow Creek discovered something very disturbing to them. They discovered through surveying their congregation that they were a very busy congregation with lots of programs, but that way too many people were becoming burned out and spiritually dead. People who were in leadership positions and very active were also feeling spiritually drained and empty.

As a result, this very successful and highly visible church made substantial changes to their ministry and became a congregation focused on listening to God's word and raising up Christian disciples. They shifted their emphasis from being inward to becoming outwardly focused.

I never thought we here at Allison Creek shared a lot in common with Willow Creek, but we do. We too are a congregation with some busy people who are feeling spiritually shallow. I hear it in our conversations when I hear you talk about feeling as though you have low energy, or that there are places other than worship you would like to be, or that activities which used to bring you great joy no longer do.

I see it when we see people who stop attending worship, Christian Education, or other activities. I see it when I see bodies here on Sunday morning who are not fully engaged. These are all signs of a church which is showing the signs of forgetting why we exist. Just like the Jewish people in Nehemiah's day. They too forgot why they existed.

But the Jewish people were led to go to a place which was actually their grandparent's home. The returning exiles did not know how to be a community of faith in their grandparents land. Just like those of us in the church today don't know how to be a community of faith in our grandparents institution. A religious institution which is showing its age.

So what did the Jewish people do in order to try to recapture their memory? They gathered at the Water gate and they listened to the reading of God's word. They read and they listened. It is time that each of us gathered at the water gate and listened again as well. As we ordain and install a new class of elders who are charged to lead us, this is a very appropriate time to listen.

I am not sure where we are supposed to start reading from the Bible again. But this morning I am going to read the words that Jesus began his ministry with. I don't know if this is where we begin to listen. But as I read these words, I invite us to listen.

As I read these words from Luke this morning, I invite you to listen for a word or phrase that really seems to jump out to you. In fact, I will read the Isaiah passage that Jesus quotes a couple of times to help us to begin to attentively listen.

And then I am going to do something really crazy and scary. I am going to ask if some of you would be willing to share what word or phrase jumps out to you. And then after we do that, I am going to ask you to prayerfully consider what that word or phrase might mean to you or to this congregation or to the community where you live.

I'm not sure where this is going to lead. This is so unpredictable. Sooo un-Presbyterian. But let us attempt to listen once again to God's word.

Read Luke 4:14-21 and reread vs. 18-19.

Invite folks to share a word or phrase that they hear from this text. Spend some time in silence.

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-“Coping with Memory Loss as it spans generations,” NPR storycorp segment on January 22, 2010, and found at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=122822815>

-Text: Nehemiah 1,8 and Luke 4:14-21

-Given: January 24, 2010 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)