

Kirby Lawrence Hill
May 25, 2014
Psalm 66:8-20
John 14:15-27

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

CALLED ALONGSIDE

After his wife's death from cancer, British writer C. S. Lewis kept a journal of his thoughts and feelings and published them in a book called A Grief Observed. One of his most perceptive observations was how quickly our memories of a person lose touch with the real person. He wrote, "Today I had to meet a man I haven't seen for ten years. And all that time I had thought I was remembering him well - how he looked and spoke and the sort of things he said. The first five minutes of the real man shattered the image completely. Not that he had changed. On the contrary. I kept on thinking, 'Yes, of course, of course. I'd forgotten that he thought that - or disliked this, or knew so-and-so - or jerked his head back that way.' I had known all these things once and I recognized them the moment I met them again. But they had all faded out of my mental picture of him, and when they were all replaced by his actual presence the total effect was quite astonishingly different from the image I had carried about with me for those ten years."

Then he made this observation: "How can I hope that this will not happen to my memory of [my wife]? That it is not happening already? Slowly, quietly, like snow-flakes that come when it is going to snow all night - little flakes of me, my impressions, my selections, are settling down on the image of her. The real shape will be quite hidden in the end. Ten minutes - ten seconds - of [my real wife] would correct all this. And yet, even if those ten seconds were allowed to me, one second later the little flakes would begin to fall again. The rough, sharp, cleansing tang of her otherness is gone."¹

Lewis is describing the difference between the memory of a person and an encounter with the real person. A memory is inevitably shaped by our selective or preferred recollections. The presence of the real living person has the ability to challenge such impressions. That's because real people do not always respond the way we thought they would. They do not always follow our script. A living, breathing, acting individual has the ability to reveal things about herself or himself that we had not noticed before or did not remember, or did not want to remember. In John's gospel account, we hear Jesus talking with his followers on the night before he would die. "I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you." Yes, the Holy Spirit does bring to our memories what Jesus has said and done through our remembrances of the accounts of him, but the Spirit does more than that. William Sloane Coffin, who was a pastor in Manhattan, once said, "I believe in the resurrection because I experience Christ not as a memory but as a presence. On Easter we close the show not with 'Thanks for the Memories' but with 'Jesus Christ is Risen Today.'²

Jesus had been God in human form, called to be a part of humanity for a period of time. Now that he is no longer in human form, he does not just leave us on our own. We are not left as orphans, Jesus says. It's not the easiest thing to talk about how God or Jesus or the Spirit is present with us. We cannot experience that divine presence quite like we do of someone we can see and touch and hear. For us who experience the world through our senses, how do we express our experience of divine presence in a way that isn't nonsense? In explaining that to children, we sometimes talk about having Jesus present not just in our thoughts, but in our hearts. I once heard about a young child coming home from church. Sitting in the car next to his mother, the child leaned over and put his ear on his mother's chest. The mother asked, "What are you doing?" The child said, "I'm listening to Jesus in your heart." The mother was quiet for a moment, then said, "Well, what do you hear?" The child replied, "It sounds like he's making

coffee.”³

In John’s Gospel, something more is brewing here than just coffee. The word in the original Greek describing the Holy Spirit which is translated as ‘Advocate,’ is the word ‘paraklete.’ Advocate or helper may be about the best translation we can get in English. But the Greek word literally is a combination of words that means ‘one who is called alongside.’ In his description, Jesus tells his followers that the Spirit will abide with them and will be in them. So we don’t have to just count on our faulty memories that get covered with the snow of our own impressions and preferences. The rough sharp tang of [our Lord’s] otherness is not gone. God’s own Spirit is called to go alongside us. We continue to have experiences of God’s real presence and grace in our lives. We’re not just reminiscing about old times from two thousand years ago.

That presence enables the formation of a community of faith that learns and worships together. Jesus’ original followers experienced a sense of community centered in their Lord’s teachings and ministry. They learned how to rejoice with those who were rejoicing and to mourn with those who were mourning. They learned how to make decisions together for what was best for the whole community as they sought to live out God’s will for their lives together. They sang and they prayed and they studied scripture together. In these ways, they were led by the Spirit of Christ even after he was no longer physically present with them.

We continue to be led today by this One who is called to go alongside us. We are not dealing with the exact same things Jesus’ original followers had to navigate. Our human foibles are much the same as were theirs, and like them, the Spirit enables us to come to grips with them. But we are on twenty-first century terrain here and the Spirit comes alongside us to lead us now. We don’t have to put aside everything humanity has learned in two millennia in order to be a follower of Christ.

But this One who accompanies us enables us to have a perspective reflecting priorities that go beyond us. Yes, we are self-interested. But the presence of the Spirit guides us and inspires us toward a generosity, a love, an ability to forgive that is greater than if we were just on our own. As a result of the presence of God’s Spirit, we are enabled to make sacrifices to feed people who aren’t related to us. Some of those people live in our community, some live in various places around the world. This congregation is sending a group of us to go hundreds of miles away this summer to help rebuild the homes that were destroyed in tornadoes last year. Do we know any of the people in Oklahoma who have suffered these losses? Not yet. But in a way, the One who is called alongside us enables us to go alongside others, in community and in ministry as we learn and grow in the continuing presence of God. We’re not just remembering and reliving the past. The One who is called alongside us, the very Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of God is with us and is forging new and ongoing real experiences of the presence of God. Even though we can’t use our sense of sight or touch or hearing directly to experience the Spirit’s presence, it is what makes sense of our experience that draws us together in community and sends us out in mission. Yes, we give thanks for the memories which are rich and even inspirational. However, with the presence of the One who is called alongside of us, we have much more reason than that for which to say thanks and we have so much to anticipate about what God is going to do with us and through us in times to come.

¹ C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, Harper Collins, 1961.

² William Sloane Coffin, *Credo*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.

³ From a sermon, “Not Just a Memory,” by Ken Onstot, at Hamblen Park *Presbyterian Church*, Spokane, Washington.