

Malcolm Clemens Young
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, 2A15, M8
Evensong #40 - 5 Lent (Year B)
Thursday 26 March 2020

Jer. 31:31-4
Ps 51:1-13
Heb. 5:5-10
Jn. 12:20-33

Giving Your Life

"And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" John 12.

This poem is called "Ask Me," by William Stafford (1914-1993):

"Some time when the river is ice ask me
mistakes I have made. Ask me whether
what I have done is my life. Others
have come in their slow way into
my thought, and some have tried to help
or to hurt: ask me what difference
their strongest love or hate has made.

I will listen to what you say.
You and I can turn and look
at the silent river and wait. We know
the current is there, hidden; and there
are comings and goings from miles away
that hold the stillness exactly before us.
What the river says, that is what I say."¹

Is what you have done your life? What difference have those who love you and hate you made?

Jesus says, "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (Jn. 12). He puts into question what it means to live or die. He makes us less certain what our life really is. I believe that it takes someone with the power of Jesus to dispel our most persistent illusions. Some fantasies can be so widespread within a culture that it can take generations to understand the truth.

On August 18, 1967 at Boston's Fenway Park Red Sox outfielder Tony Conigliaro was at the plate facing California Angels pitcher Jack Hamilton. On the first pitch Hamilton threw a fastball that crushed the left side of Conigliaro's face. Conigliaro never completely recovered from his injury. He left baseball in 1975 and died at the age of forty-five. That moment changed Jack Hamilton forever too.

In 1990 when Conigliaro died, Hamilton gave an interview with the *New York Times* in which he recalled what happened that day. "I've had to live with it," He said, "I think about it a lot. It was like the sixth inning when it happened. I think the score was 2-1, and he was the eighth hitter in the batting order. With the pitcher up next, I had no reason to throw at him." Hamilton remembers visiting him in the hospital that afternoon. He also remembers wondering whether he should return to Fenway for the next series of games that season.

Although Hamilton probably thought about this day many times his recollections were almost completely wrong. The accident didn't happen in the sixth inning but in the fourth. The score was not 2-1 but 0-0. Conigliaro wasn't the eighth hitter but the sixth. It wasn't even a day game so Hamilton couldn't have visited him in the hospital that afternoon, and there were no other games in Boston that year for him to wonder about whether or not he should go back there.²

It should come as no surprise to us that our memories are unreliable, that we get important details wrong. A cognitive psychologist asked forty-four students the question, "How did you first hear the news of the space ship Challenger explosion." He asked them the morning after the explosion and then two and a half years later. Although they described the memories as vivid during this second interview, none of their memories were completely accurate and one third of their memories were what the researcher called "wildly inaccurate." Many of these students couldn't believe that their revised memories were wrong. "This is my handwriting, so it must be right," said one student, "but I still remember everything the way I told you [just now]. I can't help it."³

In modern times there are so many subtle ways of not believing in God. One of them is to understand ourselves as a kind of videotape that summarizes our past, to think that in a significant sense we are our memories. If this is the implicit picture that someone has of himself, a psychologist's claims that the tape is unreliable can seem like an attack on a person's identity.

For me this way of understanding our selves is in contrast with the Bible. According to Christian tradition we do not have an existence that is independent of God. Who we are does not derive from who we were. Our life is not something that came about accidentally because of the lust or love of two other human beings a long time ago. We don't earn our life. Instead we constantly derive our life from God. Who we are is a gift from God that we receive every day.

This means that you are fundamentally safe. You do not need to worry about losing your job, your spouse, your health, the respect of the other kids in school. The self that you are is not something that you achieve through some kind of work. It is not something that comes into existence because of what you think. This self is safe from the world

Perhaps what Jesus means is that the part of ourselves we are so afraid of losing isn't really us anyway.

The novelist Ernest Hemmingway writes about a father in Spain who wanted to be reconciled to his runaway son. The father takes out an advertisement in the Madrid paper *El Liberal*. It says, "Paco, meet me noon on Tuesday at the Hotel Montana. All is forgiven! Love, Papa." Paco was a common name in those days. When the father showed up he found eight hundred young men looking for their fathers.⁴

The way that Jesus speaks through the Bible is like this. Right here we have a whole world full of Pacos, of children returning to their father. We are not our memories, our thoughts or even our actions. Like California pitcher Jack Hamilton we will make minor mistakes and some terrible life-changing ones.

But none of this changes the truth. You can ask me if what I have done is my life or about the influence of people who have loved and hated me. But that is not what I am. We are children of God who Jesus calls to return. And one day he will lift us all up into the fullness of divine joy.

¹ Published in *Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, Ed. Dana Gioia, David Mason, Meg Schoerke (NY: McGraw Hill, 2004), 530.

² Elizabeth Loftus and Katherine Ketcham, *The Myth of Repressed Memory: False Memories and Allegations of Sexual Abuse* (NY: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 75.

³ Ibid., 91-2.

⁴ Thomas Tewell, "The Things We Dare Not Remember," *Thirty Good Minutes*, 16 November 2003. http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/tewell_4707.htm