



“Jesus, Remember Me”: Biblical Imagination and the Experience of Dementia

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A real estate agent tells me what he has learned after years of selling homes: “I never count on anything until I hear someone say, ‘I can really see myself living here.’ Then I begin to think we may have found the right place.” This is a statement about the power of the imagination. Can a home buyer imagine life in this particular new home? When my friend hears evidence of that, he starts to think maybe someone will soon be moving.

As I understand it, “biblical imagination” is the capacity to see one’s true home in the world that the Old and New Testaments narrate.¹ The biblical world is not the same everywhere, but everywhere in it, God is an actor: God creates, calls, directs, leads, destroys, frees, guides. In this world, God speaks through “sheer silence” (1 Kings 19:12) and the voices of prophets. In this world, God’s Word becomes flesh and lives among us (John 1:14).

When we speak of God calling and directing *us*, or of the Word becoming flesh and living among *us*, our pronouns make it clear that we have begun to imag-

¹Speaking in the singular of a world narrated by the Bible could imply that the narrative world is monolithic, but the language need not imply this. The world narrated by the Bible is at least as varied as the world we speak of as “the real world,” filled as each is with compassion, treachery, wealth, poverty, violence, judgment, grace, and redemption.

The experience of dementia patients and their families can help us understand the experience of Jesus on the cross, and the experience of Jesus on the cross can help us make sense of dementia. Biblical imagination works in both directions.

ine scripture's world not only as a narrative construct, but also as our home. It is where we belong. If training in critical historical and literary study of the Bible makes us hesitate to say that the narrative world is identical to the world we live in, at least we can say that the two overlap. Our sense of identity, meaning, belonging, and direction are bound up with the ways that identity, meaning, belonging, and direction are constructed within the Bible.

What follows here is an exploration of how a particular collection of biblical texts may help us imagine what it means to be "at home" among a particular set of human experiences. The human experiences are those associated with Alzheimer's disease and similar forms of cognitive impairment. The biblical texts are the words of Jesus narrated by the Gospels during the crucifixion accounts. If biblical imagination shows us our true home, where do we live as memory disappears? The answer explored here is that "home" for us in such circumstances is where Jesus was as he was dying.²

FATHER, FORGIVE THEM

"Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing'" (Luke 23:34a).

After Jesus has been betrayed and deserted by friends, after he has been abandoned by the rule of Roman law, and beaten and mocked by soldiers, while he is being crucified, he says, "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they are doing."

"If we come close to the details of how life is lived, hour by hour and minute by minute, we can see many processes that work toward the undermining of people who have dementia."³ With this observation, Tom Kitwood begins a section of *Dementia Reconsidered* that outlines seventeen practices of "malignant social psychology" that contribute to further and faster losses of cognitive function by radically depersonalizing sufferers. Some of the malignant practices are obviously harmful: mocking or making jokes at a person's expense, intimidating a person with threats of physical violence. Others are more subtly harmful, like talking about a person, not necessarily unkindly, in their pres-

²A connection with the last words of Christ and the experience of Alzheimer's disease first occurred to me in the preparation of a sermon on the story of the thief alongside the crucified Jesus asking to be remembered. Imaginative engagements of biblical material and Alzheimer's disease could take a number of other forms, and they have. For example, Rabbi Dayle Friedman finds an analog to dementia in the biblical experience of wilderness ("Seeking the Tzelem: Making Sense of Dementia," *Reconstructionist* 70/2 [2006] 43–55). In the Bible's claim that humans were created in the image of God, Rabbi Hershel Jonah Matt recognizes a mandate for honoring people to the end of their lives, regardless of impairment ("Fading Image of God?: Theological Reflections of a Nursing Home Chaplain," *Judaism* 36/1 [1987] 75–83). Pastoral theologian John Swinton in *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012) echoes Paul's letter to the Romans when he declares, "Nothing can separate human beings from God's love. Not death, life, loneliness, dementia, forgetfulness, anxiety, confusion, wordlessness 'nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom. 8:38–39)" 224.

³Tom Kitwood, *Dementia Reconsidered: The Person Comes First* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1997) 45.

ence, or talking so much or so fast that a person has no hope of keeping up. Kitwood comments that most of the time caregivers do not mean harm. “[M]ost of their work is done with kindness and good intent. The malignancy is part of our cultural inheritance.”⁴

The couples from church who go to lunch and talk “around” one of their number, rather than with her, do not know what they are doing. The son who explains his refusal to visit his father by saying, “He stopped being my dad when he stopped being able to recognize me,” does not know what he is doing. The people who, as they head toward the exit of the nursing home, say, “If I get like that, just shoot me,” do not know what they are doing. The malignancy is part of our cultural inheritance.

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It creates a path that was not there before.*

If you think too long about the reality that even actions we either intend for good (or at least do not intend for harm) can actually do great damage, it is paralyzing. How do we ever manage to do anything, knowing that even our best judgments cannot be trusted?

A solution comes from outside the loop of our good intentions and harmful actions. “Forgive them,” Jesus says to his Father. Forgiveness does not change the past. It changes the future. It creates a path that was not there before. And so Jesus says, “Forgive them: Create for them a road and a destination that is not defined by what they meant or what they did, but rather by the life you mean for them and finally for us all.”

JESUS, REMEMBER ME

“Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ He replied, ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise’” (Luke 23:42–43).

Most of the time, most of us can give at least the appearance that things are not entirely falling apart. You know how it goes. When things are bad, we don’t want to be a burden. Or maybe we are worried that if we appear weak or confused, even what little autonomy we have left will be taken away. Or we know that people cut a wide swath around needy or angry people, and we don’t want to be any more isolated than we already are, so we dial back the need and fear. We minimize such things until we can’t anymore.

The man who is crucified alongside Jesus speaks for everyone who knows the experience of supports simply washed away. About to disappear, literally, from the face of the earth, the man says, “Remember me!” He is not so much asking for res-

⁴Ibid., 46.

cue from the present circumstance as for an alternative to disintegration. “Remember me when you come into your kingdom.” The thief asks Jesus to call him to mind after the worst is over for them both. He asks to be remembered. Jesus offers him a future filled with memories yet to be made.

When we cannot any longer remember the past, can its experiences still shape us? When someone no longer remembers us, are we lost, or are they? And in a context like that, what does it mean to talk about “a future filled with memories yet to be made”?

Our context for these questions is different from that of the thief on the cross, but the questions end up at the same place, namely, with the request to Jesus, “Remember me.” To these requests, Jesus responds with the offer of his own company. “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” His kingdom is wherever he is: then and there on the cross, here and now in his resurrection, and out there, in the future, with all the dying and rising that await us.

HERE IS YOUR MOTHER; HERE IS YOUR SON

“When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, here is your son.’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home” (John 19:26–27).

The Early Memory Loss Collaborative in Asheville, North Carolina, provides resources to those with a diagnosis of Alzheimer’s disease and their care partners. Among the resources they have produced is a 2013 interview with Cannan and James Hyde describing the changes in their lives since James was diagnosed, first with mild cognitive impairment in 2010, and then Alzheimer’s disease in 2013. A former medical school professor, James says, “I realized that with this memory problem, I had lived out of my head, all my life. . . . My ego was based on excelling and that kind of stuff, and I can’t do that anymore, and I realized that I couldn’t depend on my thought process, my memory process.

“So as I got to telling the children—I wanted to tell them first in the family—it dawned on me that one day I might not recognize them, and I might not be able to call their name, so putting them in my brain is not a good idea. I said, ‘I would not be able to recognize you, maybe one day, and I don’t know when that’ll be.’ Now they don’t want to hear this, of course, and so I said, ‘But I’m going to put you in my heart, because you’ll always be there.’”⁵

When Jesus is dying, he talks to his mom and his best friend. He says to them, “Look after each other, will you?” If we get the chance, we will do the same thing. We will do our best to prepare the ones we are leaving, as James said to his children, “I’m going to put you in my heart.”

⁵Jane Sherman, “Cannan and James’ Story,” at <http://vimeo.com/58582155> (accessed May 14, 2014).

At his end, Jesus defines family for the beloved disciple and his mother. The two are bound in grief, but their stronger bond is the relationship of mother and son that they share regardless of the fact that they did not start out that way. Jesus, with precious little left to give anyone, bequeaths to these two the gift of each other.

And what of those who look on as one who is beloved loses everything? Peter Kevern is skeptical that the crucified and dying Jesus could have spoken so coherently from the cross,⁶ yet he believes that Jesus' very incapacity at the end of his life reveals him for who he is: "the perfect expression of the self-emptying God."⁷ During the losses that Jesus and other incapacitated ones suffer, their identity—which was always constructed and narrated in community anyway—endures. The mother of Jesus and the beloved disciple hold the identity of Jesus even as he is letting that identity go. "In the case of somebody who is dementing, progressively more of the burden of narration may be taken by those around them—the second-person and third-person perspectives—and less by the subject; but this is not to degrade the narrative or the subject of it. In a social context, a person may persist as a person although they are individually unaware of the fact."⁸

WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?

"At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'Listen, he is calling for Elijah'" (Mark 15:34–35).

But there is one last desertion that he never expected, that he could not see coming and that he does not understand. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Reflecting on the isolation that she and her husband endure in light of his Alzheimer's disease, Aileen Barclay writes, "From the cross, Jesus' loneliness is a stark reminder to us. We too have become repulsive to our friends and cut off from the community..."⁹ Sometimes the abandonment can almost be explained away: friends who used to enjoy dinner at their home find excuses not to

⁶Peter Kevern, "Sharing the Mind of Christ: Preliminary Thoughts on Dementia and the Cross," *New Blackfriars* 91/1034 (2010) 408–422. "Under conditions of extreme fatigue, dehydration, physical injury and psychological stress, it seems highly unlikely that [Jesus] would be in a position, as John suggests, to deliver instructions for the care of his mother and theological pronouncements from the cross" (416).

⁷Ibid., 418.

⁸Ibid., 421.

⁹Aileen Barclay, "Psalm 88: Living with Alzheimer's," *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* 16/1 (2012) 88–101. Cited in Swinton, *Dementia*, 262.

come. Sometimes the feeling of forsakenness is striking: Barclay, impatient and resentful, seems a stranger even to herself!

Reporting Jesus' abandonment, Mark writes, "All of them deserted him and fled" (Mark 14:50). The disciples fall away. The politicians fail to protect the innocent. The scribes and chief priests forsake their calling to represent the will of God. Jesus meets all of these desertions with the acceptance of a man who knew, sadly, that he could not trust his friends, could not trust the system, could not trust religious institutions or their agents.

But there is one last desertion that he never expected, that he could not see coming and that he does not understand. "My God, my God, why have *you* forsaken me?"

Jesus gets no answer to his question. A voice from heaven had spoken at his baptism and at the transfiguration, claiming him as "my Son," and "the Beloved." Now, the heavens are silent, still, and dark. The only response comes from people who misunderstand even his cry of dereliction. Is he calling for Elijah? They debate this among themselves, and their incapacity to recognize the opening verse of an ancient psalm just deepens the experience of forsakenness for the Crucified One.

Sometimes the only prayer you have is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" As such times, you are in good company.

I THIRST

"After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), 'I am thirsty'" (John 19:28).

We are touring an adult care home. The director shows us the dining room with all of its extra distance between tables. We puzzle over that a moment before he reminds us that the room must accommodate not only ambulatory residents but also the occupants of several wheelchairs. We walk by the beauty shop and continue down the hall. Our guide points out the telephone room. "North Carolina law requires that each resident have access to a private space from which to make telephone calls." Only one or two of us fit into the room, and the first one across the threshold stops in her tracks and backs up. The smell and a large, dark circle on the carpet reveal that the little room has recently been mistaken for a urinal. "People get confused," the director says, "I'll get someone to clean that up."

Humans are relentless in our demands for water, food, and toilets. We need them all, from beginning to end. On the cross, the body that is Jesus says, "I thirst."

The human body is about 65 percent water, and unless we die suddenly, we will dry out quite a bit before we actually die. We will get so weak that we cannot actually suck water through a straw. The staff of hospitals and hospices know this and provide little squares of sponge stuck to something like lollipop sticks. If

you're lucky, when you're as dried out and weak as Jesus was at this point, someone will be at your side dipping one of those things into water—not vinegar—and bringing it to your lips.

INTO YOUR HANDS I COMMEND MY SPIRIT

“Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit’” (Luke 23:46a).

In a conversation about how and when someone with dementia should be told that they cannot drive or do other potentially dangerous tasks, a retired judge in the early stages of Alzheimer’s says with a twinkle in his eye, “I always get *real* organized before I go to the doctor. I get all of my legal arguments together, and I snore him! It works every time!” The room laughs, grateful for humor in the midst of a difficult discussion about loss.¹⁰

Dementia involves a lot of letting go. First you lose the car keys, then your work, and any hobbies that feature kitchen knives or power tools. You let go of words, names, sentence structure. Impulse control goes too, as eventually does managing body parts and vital organs.

Care partners do a lot of letting go as well. They let go of activities you both used to love, and plans for the future, and the look of recognition in your eyes when you see them. About his wife, a husband says, “Almost nothing that was true about her two years ago is true today.” Grief is chronic, daily present, and ever new.

“Into your hands I commit my spirit,” Jesus says, letting go himself.

What was God the Father doing while God the Son was on the cross? Trying to forgive those who didn’t know what they were doing (cf. Luke 23:34a)? Deciding whether to intervene by force (cf. Matthew 26:53)? Weeping, as Jesus had wept for Lazarus outside the tomb (cf. John 11:35)? These answers are all conjecture, of course. Whatever God the Father was doing, God the Son borrows from a psalm to speak his own moment of letting go. Psalm 31:5 reads, “Into your hand I commend my spirit; you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.” So Jesus says, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” Letting go is always the last thing you try.

IT IS FINISHED

“When Jesus had received the wine, he said, ‘It is finished.’ Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit” (John 19:30).

Robert Smith paraphrases Jesus’ words, “It is finished,” by saying, “The mission I came to accomplish, the love I came to lavish, the light I came to shed, the

¹⁰Jane Sherman, moderator, “Please Talk with Us, Not About Us” (Early Memory Loss Collaborative panel presentation, Sacred Journey of Dementia Conference, Asheville, NC, April 13, 2013) at <http://vimeo.com/67407508> (accessed May 14, 2014).

truth to tell, the life to create, the lost to gather—all the work given me by the Father is here and now finished and complete.”¹¹

The last paragraph of Mayo Clinic’s web article on the stages of Alzheimer’s disease does not have quite the same ring to it: “On average, people with Alzheimer’s disease live eight to 10 years after diagnosis, but some survive as long as 25 years. Pneumonia is a common cause of death because impaired swallowing allows food or beverages to enter the lungs, where an infection can begin. Other common causes of death include complications from urinary tract infections and falls.”¹²

Might we imagine our death, whether it comes from the complications of late-stage Alzheimer’s disease or in some other way, not as a failure of modern medicine, but as the completion of something important? Our death marks the moment when the work given to us by God—every calling—is accomplished.

Smith has imagined more energy flowing through Jesus’ last words than a suffocating, crucified man would have,¹³ yet *tetelestai* (“It is finished”) certainly communicates the news of something *accomplished*. Might we imagine our death, whether it comes from the complications of late-stage Alzheimer’s disease or in some other way, not as a failure of modern medicine, but as the completion of something important? Our death marks the moment when the work given to us by God—every calling—is accomplished. In general terms, God calls us to love one another (cf. John 15:12; Gal 6:2; 1 John 3:11, 18). John Swinton reminds us that the changed modes of loving and being loved that are available to those people who have dementia and those living with them “are no less authentic than the modes of love that we see more often. They’re just different.”¹⁴ The capacity for love and belonging, and the calling to give and receive love and a sense of belonging, are accomplished in us, but not before we breathe our last.

I began by proposing that biblical imagination is the capacity to see scripture as revealing the truth about us. The world scripture narrates is the world where we belong. As I worked at reading scripture in light of the experience of Alzheimer’s

¹¹Robert Smith, *Wounded Lord: Reading John through the Eyes of Thomas* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009) 176.

¹²“Alzheimer’s Stages: How the Disease Progresses,” at <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/alzheimers-disease/in-depth/alzheimers-stages/art-20048448?pg=2> (accessed May 14, 2014).

¹³On the precise causes of Jesus’ death, see William D. Edwards et al., “On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 255/11 (1986) 1455–1463.

¹⁴Swinton, *Dementia*, 182.

disease, I could never be sure whether the experience of Alzheimer's mediated to me by those who are dealing with it was interpreting scripture or the other way around. I am fairly sure both things were happening at once, and at some point I decided to stop worrying about the distinction. The experience of dementia patients and their families helps me understand the experience of Jesus on the cross, and the experience of Jesus on the cross helps me make sense of dementia. My imagination for both—and for seeing my own life as graciously bound up with both—expanded as the work progressed. I trust the reader may find a similar experience. ⊕

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