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To Remember Well Together:  
Preaching and Memory in Ethnically  
Diverse Congregations

LISA W. LAMB

Sarah, a slender Cambodian, shyly approached the microphone, a map of Africa on the screen behind her. “I have been asked to lead the congregation in prayer for Sudan today,” she said softly, “because I too have lived through genocide.” In my pew, I gasped internally. I’d chatted over coffee after church with Sarah several times—How was it I had never learned that traumatic part of her history? As I reflected on it later, my questions as a preacher were: How has that past formed Sarah as a hearer of the word? What does she hear with more clarity and what is harder for her to hear because of the memories she carries? How might I preach differently, knowing that Sarah is in the pew?

As pastors who seek to increase the ethnic diversity of our congregations, we are often puzzled by the complexity of that task. But a lens for understanding both the challenge of coming together across ethnic lines and the role preaching can play can be found in memory. This essay will examine the ways that individuals and communities are formed by their memories, so that preachers can preach *out of* greater awareness of their shaping power and so that the preached word can speak

*Memory is an active process that functions to shape community among ethnic groups. Preaching can engage the memories of various ethnic groups in a congregation, shaping it into a vibrant community that is capable of the disciplines of forgiveness, hospitality, and love that make ethnic reconciliation possible.*

into and engage the memory practices of their congregations. The preached word can form congregations into vibrant communities of memory that are capable of the disciplines of forgiveness, hospitality, and love that make ethnic reconciliation possible. Two shifts in how memory has historically been conceived are significant here; more extended attention will be given to the second.

#### FROM MEMORIES AS STATIC OBJECTS TO MEMORIES AS DYNAMIC PROCESSES

First, memory has made the leap from the slide show to the moving picture. Memories in antiquity, especially for rhetoricians, were conceived as static items, reliably frozen in certain metaphorical internal locations: vast storehouses, palaces, or elaborate series of rooms within the speaker's mind. The only trick was to access the memory. Paul Ricoeur refers to this as "the tradition of inwardness."<sup>1</sup>

In a move that probably sheds more light on how memory actually functions, scholars today construe memory as a process and a practice. Memory is constructed, interactively and interpretively. This shift in understanding has arisen in tandem with considerations of culture itself as a dynamic and evolving process. Viewing memory as a practice highlights its ethical dimension. Memory can be put to various uses and thus has great power to shape identity and to form people ethically and spiritually. Miroslav Volf writes, "Whatever we do with our memories, our identity shifts, however slightly, in the process of using them."<sup>2</sup>

The opportunity here for preachers is that the proclaimed word can actually enter midstream into the remembering process and school listeners in remembering well: interpreting and framing the past in ways that extend grace and truth to self and others, rather than pride or bitterness. The writers of Scripture intuitively grasped this potential, and sought to influence the remembering practices of their listeners. Deuteronomy knew that remembering would guard and build faith, gratitude, wisdom, and humility within the fledgling nation of Israel (Deut 15:15, 26:5–10, 8:11–20). Paul knew that for the Gentiles, forgetting their dark past would lead to complacent pride, so he called them to active remembering (Eph 2:11–13). Scripture portrays remembering as a strenuous practice, and preaching as a means of building the muscles of memory.<sup>3</sup>

#### FROM INDIVIDUAL TO SOCIAL REMEMBERING

A second shift in construing memory came when, early in the twentieth century, a few innovative thinkers began to consider the *social* context of remembering. The leader of this group was Maurice Halbwachs, a French sociologist (1877–1945). Halbwachs, who died at Buchenwald, brought the term *collective*

<sup>1</sup>Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) 97.

<sup>2</sup>Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006) 69.

<sup>3</sup>See Stephen's failed attempt to recall Israel's history to the council (Acts 7:1–60) and Paul's many written and spoken reminders to Christians (for example, Acts 20:17–36).

memory into the contemporary scholarly vocabulary.<sup>4</sup> Halbwachs observed the ways in which groups, from families to nations, constructed memories so as to highlight and perpetuate their particular identities and interests.

Halbwachs proposed that individual memory is embedded in one's membership in social groups. One remembers not in isolation but in a process of actual or imagined mutual verbal construction and elaboration. He observed, "One cannot think about the events of one's past without discoursing upon them. But to discourse upon something means to connect within a single system of ideas our opinions as well as those of our circle."<sup>5</sup> Thus, the presence of the other is crucial to retrieving, perpetuating, and making sense of one's memories.

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Here Halbwachs made a fundamental departure from Freud's understanding of the self and of memory. Freud perceived memory to be stored in the individual psyche, the access to which was blocked by screen memories and other forms of repression. In a groundbreaking move, Halbwachs expanded the sources and storehouses of memory to the external and social world. He wrote, "There is thus no point in seeking where [my memories] are preserved in...some nook of my mind to which I alone have access: for they are recalled to me externally, and the groups of which I am a part at any time give me the means to reconstruct them."<sup>6</sup> For Halbwachs, individual memory was only possible through participation in society.

In Halbwachs's thought, social frameworks give groups common perspectives, continuity, and coherent identities. The framework functions much like the plot summary of a novel; it is the set of essential images of past events and the relationships linking them that determine the order, meaning, and relative value of those images. Recollection happens through that sifting framework that represents the perspectives and interests of the groups of which we are part. A striking example of this is a study done in 1991, in which 728 older Germans were asked to name and discuss important events of the previous sixty years. Narrations of World War II focused on bombings and food shortages in Germany, and only seven respondents mentioned Jews at any point.<sup>7</sup> As it does for all of us, the German respondents' social framework allowed some memories to fade, while keeping others vivid and emblematic.

<sup>4</sup>See Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 53.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Howard Schuman, Hiroko Akiyama, and Barbel Knauper, "Collective Memories of Germans and Japanese about the Past Half-Century," in *Surveying Memory Processes: A Special Issue of Memory*, ed. Daniel B. Wright and George D. Gaskell (East Sussex, England: Psychology Press, 1998) 439.

One limitation of Halbwachs's work is that he, like most thinkers of his time, viewed culture monolithically. He highlighted well the forces toward stability and homogeneity, but overlooked the way that culture itself is a dynamic and contested process, with social memory itself a site of contestation. Memory both stabilizes and disrupts; it both unites and fragments. Still, his thought helps us to understand the dynamics at play in individual and collective remembering; it gives us a lens that clarifies the difficulty of preaching in ethnically diverse settings, where individuals have been shaped in different ways by their pasts and their community's constructions of those pasts.

#### ETHNIC GROUPS AS COMMUNITIES OF MEMORY AND AS HEARERS OF THE WORD

Ethnicity is a term much in flux today. Ethnic identity has become highly malleable, instrumental, and even situational. Postmodern definitions stress ethnic identity as an evolving series of individual choices to affiliate with others for celebration or resistance.<sup>8</sup> Here we want to assert that ethnic groups are also *communities of memory*. John Hingham writes, "[A] means of generalizing about American ethnic groups, and distinguishing among them, lies at hand, surprisingly neglected. It lies in the recognition that all such groups arise from, or must create, a community of memory....[M]emory is what binds an ethnic group together. Memory recalls and fixates a particular origin, from which it projects a continuity of subsequent experience."<sup>9</sup>

Ethnic groups construct narratives that depict the meaning of events in their past, wisely interpreting some and selfishly distorting others. Often undisclosed to outsiders, those shared narratives unite ethnic groups within themselves, distinguish them from others, and foment both vibrant heritage and bitter hostility. All societies find ways to narrate wounds suffered and wounds inflicted, along with redemptive and triumphant moments. Some do so in ways that allow them to transcend their past and find meaningful connection with other cultures, while other groups' narrations leave them mired in the past and stranded in isolation.

#### PREACHING OUT OF AWARENESS OF MULTIPLE COMMUNITIES OF MEMORY

What happens when members of multiple ethnic groups attempt to gather in a voluntary association not based on ethnicity? If that setting is church, how do we account for the shaping forces of memory that influence what our listeners will hear? Walter Brueggemann writes, "[L]istening is done through certain sensitivities that may distort, emphasize, enhance, or censor, depending on the particular

<sup>8</sup>For ethnic identity construction based in legitimation, resistance, and shared projects, see Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004) 8.

<sup>9</sup>John Hingham, "The Amplitude of Ethnic History: An American Story," in *Not Just Black and White: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Immigration, Race and Ethnicity in the United States*, ed. Nancy Foner and George M. Fredrickson (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2004) 62.

situation of the listening community. The listening community is engaged in a constructive act of construal, of choosing, discerning, and shaping the text through the way the community chooses to listen.”<sup>10</sup>

New Testament Professor Mark Alan Powell asked one hundred North American seminarians, a broad sample in terms of age, gender, race, etc., to read silently the Luke 15:11–32 story of the Prodigal Son, and then to recount it as accurately as possible in pairs. A full one hundred percent of those good capitalist listeners recalled that the young man *squandered his money*, while only six noted that a famine came upon the land. Repeating the experiment in St. Petersburg, Russia, Powell found that only thirty-four percent mentioned the squandering of money, whereas a striking eighty-four percent mentioned the famine. Powell notes that during World War II, St. Petersburg endured a famine for nearly three years, causing the death of 670,000 people.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the famine “detail” of Jesus’ story would register in their minds with much greater force than in the minds of North Americans, for whom the detail that lodged with most force was the reckless waste of wealth.

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Powell seeks to heighten the sensitivity of pastors to the fact that listeners are always engaged in a process of sorting input. They prioritize it, match it to existing memories and worldviews, and reject or forget some of it. He notes, “[T]hey create a meaning that seems appropriate to them with little awareness of the extent to which their social location has influenced that process.”<sup>12</sup>

A clear implication is that preachers need to become aware of their own social location as they attend to and interpret texts. Realizing that the illustrations and interpretations that come most readily to mind for them may not resonate with those culturally different from themselves, they can work on several strategies. One is to broaden the range of preachers, through developing lay preachers and inviting guests. Another is to bring more reticent speakers up for brief testimonies, like Sarah’s in the introduction to this essay. Another is to develop their skills as listeners to the stories in their congregations and communities, with ears attuned to pain endured and joys experienced.

My own congregation has members who have immigrated in their generation from over seventeen nations, and nonimmigrant minority people as well. All have known displacement and subtle or overt racism, and some have endured famine,

<sup>10</sup>Walter Brueggemann, “The Social Nature of Biblical Text,” in *Preaching as a Social Act: Theology and Practice*, ed. Arthur Van Seters (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988) 128.

<sup>11</sup>Mark Allan Powell, *What Do They Hear? Bridging the Gap between Pulpit and Pew* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007) 11–16.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 19.

ethnic cleansing, repressive regimes, and brutal civil wars. As our preaching team has sought to name those experiences in the pulpit sensitively, and to connect them with the metaphors, stories, and promises of Scripture, we have found that we speak a word of grace and hope into that pain.<sup>13</sup> As a wider range of stories is told, those who have grown up in relative ease and whose ethnicity places them at the center of cultural acceptance find that they can access different life experiences that allow them to relate to the sermon and with those who share their pew. This diversity of backgrounds and listening capacities makes the preaching task both richer and more complex, as preachers consciously let the texts of Scripture meet a broad range of experiences.

### PREACHING TO SHAPE HABITS OF MEMORY

Powell's study demonstrates vividly the challenge of preaching out of an awareness of memory and its interpretive filters. But we also want to preach so as to *cultivate* communities of memory. Choices enabling people to remember well become springboards for confessing sin, expressing empathy, and extending hospitality. Pastoral leaders find in the preached word and the Eucharist rich resources for that endeavor.

Several opportunities emerge as diverse individuals choose to place themselves within the church as the primary community of memory that frames and informs their past. Any choice to come to church involves an implicit recognition that one's own interpretation of the past is limited and may need correction or broadening, reframing in the light of a larger story or a conflicting perspective. This has profound implications for those who have inherited racist narratives of the histories of others from their family or community.

### CHURCH AS CORRECTIVE LENS: REMEMBERING AND CONFESSION

As we choose to remember *in church*, we acknowledge that our own memory-constructing capacities are faulty, and that those of our culture have been as well. We too readily don the distorting lenses of self-justification, self-condemnation, or nostalgia. Nietzsche insightfully named the role of pride in the repression of memories of which we are ashamed. He wrote, "I have done that,' says my memory. 'I cannot have done that,' says my pride, and remains inexorable. Eventually memory yields."<sup>14</sup>

Nietzsche is right about the human tendency, but he did not tell the whole story. Membership in a community of faith can be a powerful antidote to pride and may even undo its distorting effects on memory. When acts of confession are made

<sup>13</sup>James Nieman and Thomas Rogers offer excellent advice on this in *Preaching to Every Pew: Cross-Cultural Strategies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001) 104–111.

<sup>14</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, vol. 6/2 of *Nietzsche Werke*, ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1968) 68; cited in Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) 247.

safe by a culture of grace, a more clear-eyed look at one's own past and that of one's nation and ethnic group becomes possible and redemptive. Preaching Jesus' death and resurrection is one of the primary ways we form within our listeners that culture of grace. Rowan Williams writes, "[W]e have already seen how the bare, context-less recovery of memory can be something regarded only with terror and despair. What happens in the resurrection is that this memory is given back in a particular kind of context—in the presence of Jesus."<sup>15</sup> In that transformative presence we can tell the truth, and we can hear the word speak truth into our lives.

#### TAKING TIME TO REMEMBER TOGETHER: EMPATHY AND HOSPITALITY

While not directly related to preaching, pastoral leadership seeks to shape congregations that make space to hear the stories of others. Such communities are more capable of empathy and solidarity with those whose stories they take the time to hear. The very act of hearing often restores dignity. The willingness to hear the painful and joyful pasts of others is a harbinger of a growing capacity within a congregation to include and honor them. Stanley Hauerwas writes of a deeply divided church in South Africa, but his words apply here as well. He writes, "The possibility of reconciled memory between peoples who have wronged and been wronged by one another is but another name for church. To be such a church takes time and in the taking becomes time in God's very life."<sup>16</sup>

The stories of ethnic journeys often take the form of reminiscence, a leisurely form of narration that runs counter to the efficiency-minded "drive-through" culture of many churches today. While this narration may not take place in the Sunday service, pastors can model and nurture a high capacity and a genuine desire to hear the reminiscences that matter to congregants, and this in turn will build the congregation's capacity to hear and remember well together.

Within the sacred space of church, remembering well together becomes an occasion for delight in difference and enrichment from it. When we hear the joyful memories of others, our affection for them grows. We see the "family resemblance" between others and ourselves, though on the surface we seem very different, as we resonate with stories of joys they have experienced and ways they have triumphed over adversity. As a community, all the members may celebrate what is best in the history of various ethnic groups, and the values formed there that have shaped them positively. This can in turn enrich the values and practices of the entire congregation, helping it to become a "third culture" that draws on the strengths of many cultures.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup>Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (New York: Pilgrim, 1984) 35.

<sup>16</sup>Stanley Hauerwas, "Why Time Cannot and Should Not Heal the Wounds of History, but Time Has Been and Can Be Redeemed," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 53/1 (2000) 46.

<sup>17</sup>Here, "third culture" refers to a hybrid culture that honors and draws upon both or many subcultures, one that may emerge in a shared cultural space such as a congregation. Kathy Black uses the term of multiethnic congregations in which, "a 'third' culture emerges out of shared memories that blends elements from each of the cultures present." Kathy Black, *Culturally-Conscious Worship* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000) 90.

Such stories may provoke listeners to identify with God's work in their own histories. Listeners may recognize anew that they are profoundly loved, held, and valued by God in the same way as the one who is testifying.

#### WORD AND TABLE RE-MEMBERING US

We enter the community of faith confessing that we need others, and we need the word of God, to re-collect us, to give context and clarity to our memories. As David Augsburger writes, "Re-membering, in its root meaning, is to reconnect member pieces of data, fact, and fragmented story into a coherent account. In deep remembering, members of a community or group that have been dismembered are re-membered. The severed is reunited, the broken made whole."<sup>18</sup> The preached word excels at this task. Proclamation names the activity of the Spirit of God in events that are difficult to interpret and integrate into the present. In turn, it names the presence of God in the joyful experiences in our pasts, so that they become sources of gratitude and hope. It can embed God's eschatological future into the narration of past and present in ways that radically reinterpret both.

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As listeners to Scripture acquire the discipline and skill of learning to remember Israel's past—and that of the church throughout history—as their own, they gain a transferable skill of empathetic imagination towards others. The empathetic process involves suspending one's own frame of reference and penetrating the perceptions and emotions of the other. As listeners are drawn into textual worlds, they grow in the ability to extend themselves toward the other; they become more able to hear contemporary stories of suffering and joy and other testimonies of immigrant journeys, and begin to incorporate them into a mental framework of what life can entail. Helen Oppenheimer writes, "[E]xercising historical imagination is not itself Christian love, but it could be a way of laying good foundations. Getting into the habit of *thinking of other people as real* is a kind of basis for Christian love; and it is harder than it sounds."<sup>19</sup> The choice to honor and commemorate the suffering of others is in itself an act of costly generosity; it involves time-consuming choices to learn that history and engage with it. Engaging Scripture trains us for that task.

Through preaching, the church is formed into a holding space, at once safe and transformative, for sifting memories of great pain. But it is when preaching is

<sup>18</sup>David Augsburger, *Hate-Work: Working Through the Pain and Pleasures of Hate* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004) 75.

<sup>19</sup>Helen Oppenheimer, "Remembering," *Theology* 98/786 (1995) 421.

set in the context of Eucharist that it is most potent to achieve this. The altar or table provides a sacred space and marks out a holy time within which participants may encounter and integrate their memories in the presence of Christ. In connecting the deeply embodied nature of Eucharist and its power, particularly in contexts of physical oppression, South African Robert Vosloo writes, “Hereby God has created a space where people can mourn over the injustice to *bodies*, and keep the memory of those bodies alive. Through the Eucharist Christians remember Christ’s broken body. [This] serves as model and source for the body of Christ to embody reconciliation.”<sup>20</sup>

### PROCLAIMING MYSTERIES, GUARDING MEMORIES

The necessity of learning, guarding, and sometimes telling the secrets of another ethnic group resonates with a paradox at the heart of preaching. By its nature as proclamation, preaching is highly public; it is not about keeping secrets but about making the gospel plain. And yet, the truth it makes plain is the mysterious, unspeakable, and hidden nature of God. So preaching participates both in revealing and protecting secrets and mysteries. This dual nature of preaching makes it uniquely capable to speak of ethnic pain and sin in ways that honor, connect, and heal.

Pastors who dwell amidst multiple subcultures live in a similar tension between openness and vulnerability. They both guard secrets in their priestly work of bearing their members’ sorrows and cultivate a community that is capable of bearing those secrets together. In a climate still deeply divided over race and ethnicity, North America is desperate for spaces where it is safe to tell dangerous and painful memories and where others truly desire to hear them. It matters that those stories are told, and that they are told *in church*, where disparate people are gathered into one people by Holy Baptism and Eucharist, and where, as they hear the word of God, they are learning to remember well together. We preach toward that end. ☩



LISA W. LAMB has recently completed her PhD in practical theology (homiletics emphasis) at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, where she is currently teaching as adjunct faculty. Her dissertation topic was “The Theology and Sociology of Remembering Together: A Homiletic for Multi-Ethnic Congregations.” Lamb holds a BA degree in classics from the University of California at Santa Cruz and an MA in theology from Andover Newton Theological School. She earned her MDiv also at Fuller. Lisa Lamb is in the ordination process with the Presbyterian Church (USA).

<sup>20</sup>Robert Vosloo, “Reconciliation as the Embodiment of Memory and Hope,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 109 (March 2001) 40.