

With Thanksgiving for the Life of
George Philip Steinmetz, Jr.
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1Corinthians15, Matthew6

Don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.

Jesus speaks this as encouragement for generosity, for selfless almsgiving, for open-handedness that does clench a fist of entitlement but releases so abundantly and generously that it refuses to tally and ignores any kind of score-keeping record.

I know straight off there's a risk in commending something that won't keep score at the funeral of a guy who was a guard in the Badgers' first trip to the Rose Bowl, maybe not least because George got to hold in his hand the astonishing amount of \$1000 for tickets he scalped to actor Fred McMurray. And though the Badgers had the best stats of that whole season against USC, they got blanked 7-0.

Maybe that actually does promote not keeping score, that there was plenty to that experience and George's identity as an athlete and growing as a young man that wasn't about one final win.

But, again, it may seem even more strange to talk about a left hand not knowing what a right hand is doing for a heart surgeon, for a man who used to have dog heart valves stored in the garage where he had his office, for this doctor who extended care to thousands of open-heart patients, extended their lives, and extending the possibility of their loving relationships, while also extending that knowledge and research and training to subsequent generations of medical and surgical staff.

I'm not surgeon, and can hardly hold my hand steady enough to brush my teeth, and certainly would not be invited to do the precision work that might involve sharp tools and careful cutting, but having gotten to watch the finesse and artistry of some surgery this week, it sure seems that it's worthwhile to keep track of what both hands are doing and not to let one go off and do its own thing unnoticed. So, yet again, this little verse

spoken by Jesus may seem like we shouldn't apply it too closely to George.

In spite of those parts that don't seem exactly to fit, or to go hand-in-hand or hand-in-glove with George's life story and personality, still I'll say that this saying from Jesus occurred to me first because of how I knew George. I've been his pastor for less than three years, so I didn't know the vibrant and strong George in the ways you did. I knew him after he lost much of his memory. He still had photos of Joe displayed prominently. He knew and cherished that Suzie was right there near him. He and I could talk about his childhood, growing up on Fox Avenue, and I think about him every time I'm walking my dog past his childhood house. He recalled growing up at Luther Memorial.

But then we'd start to lose track. He'd ask again which congregation I was from, and if he'd been a member there. He could briefly recall the gardens on our grounds and being excited by those. And he always knew he was a part of the dear group of guys called GEMS, the Grumpy Elderly Men, and remembered that connection.

So I'm hesitant to mention George's lost his memory. He had so much good and full, in his career, in his family, in enjoying travels, in all of life. He was strong of body and of mind. It could seem only to highlight sadness and emphasize the loss of this moment to mention the contrasting moment.

But I mention it because that's what I knew of George, how I came to love him, and that will be the way I miss him.

And I mention it because with this faith we gather around today and with the God in whose name we are gathered, this isn't only something to be ignored or avoided. We can confront the illnesses and losses of life, and even face this terrible moment of death itself. Even as today we are especially clinging to memories of the past, we recognize that the goodness of our hope is not only in how well we recall what has been.

So when Jesus talks about a right hand not knowing what the left hand is doing, we can take that as applying to George's loss of memory, and

realize that it doesn't separate him from the love of God in Christ Jesus. We may not assert that dementia brings us closer to God, but I'd gladly and eagerly proclaim that God brings you closer in such moments, that when thoughts won't stay in a head and when you don't have the capabilities you used to and wish you still did, that God holds you yet more tightly in the promise.

In that way, I want to commend to us two more Bible passages that not only manage to deal with losing memory, but find in it the way forward, the way to new life, even the celebration of blessing.

The first is again from the Apostle Paul, in striving for his own forgetfulness. He wrote, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. This one thing I do: **forgetting** what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead" (Philippians 3:10-13).

Paul claims that in forgetting the things that he would've considered his previous accomplishments or successes in life or marks of superiority, then he recognizes the fullness of life offered as he is made God's own. Jesus has also claimed George, not mindful of what he had or hadn't done in life, not only celebrating his career or integrity, but simply for his own love, straining on toward the heavenly goal of resurrection.

With that view from Paul for George, one more word of God's own loss of memory. Exactly contradicting any sense of an eternal record keeper who logs our every action for good or ill, the prophet Jeremiah recognizes that God, too, must forget and proclaims this Word of the Lord (which even includes some heart surgery, we might say): "This is the covenant that I will make, says the LORD: I will write it on their hearts. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest; for I will forgive their iniquity, and **remember** their sin **no more**" (Jeremiah 31:33-34).

We have a God who doesn't—who in fact refuses—to keep track, to tally our sense of accomplishment, and who sets aside what we lament as deficit. God's own left hand doesn't know what the right is doing, in lavishing on us the gifts of life, deserved or undeserved, abundant and grace-filled, the blessings of 87 years, the love of family and two marriages, of deep friendships, the care of tending life all the way to last days, and promises even more to come in an eternal victory.

So whether we know it or not, the one thing this God will remember is to be with you always in love.

Now I would remind you, siblings, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—By the grace of God I am what I am, and God's grace toward me has not been in vain. In fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being, so all will be made alive in Christ. So with the resurrection of the dead, what is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power.

Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

And one little phrase from Jesus:

“Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.”