

from our pastor

Article from the Winter 2019 Messenger

David Keck is the author of a book called *Forgetting Whose we Are: Alzheimer's Disease and the Love of God*. He calls Alzheimer's the "theological disease". This disease and others like it give rise to profound religious questions. They strike at values we hold most dear: our autonomy, our sense of self, our identity and sense of belonging. Memory really make us who we are, provides the continuity essential for a sense of self.

This disease certainly prompts us to ask that perennial question about the existence of evil: **Why has God created this ugliness? Why has God allowed it to flourish?** But there are other questions as well. **How does a family praise and love God through the course of this disease, through the slow deterioration, disintegration, decline, the physical and mental erosion that can last from three to twenty years?** It's a disease that has also been called the long goodbye.

The most important questions involve our relationship with God. If memory is crucial for identity, isn't it also important for the spiritual life, for religion, for discipleship, for faith, for salvation? Much about what the scripture demands from us can be summed up in the word "remember!" Israel is a community of faith vitalized by memory. These people knew their God not so much by reflection on the wonders of nature, but by reflection on God's action for their salvation in their own history, remembering it, celebrating it. The Eucharist is a memorial sacrifice. As often as we proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes—as often as we remember, in other words—God continues his saving work among us.

But what is the meaning of this, of the gospel, for someone who cannot remember his or her own name or recognize the faces of ones who love them? How is it possible to speak of a personal relationship with God when there seems to be no person left? As memory itself dissolves, as the self disintegrates, as one forgets all one's previous religious commitment and pious practices, one can forget even God. As we forget whose we are, what does participation in the life of the Church mean then?

The experience of dementia, of Alzheimer's, reminds us that none of us are as autonomous as we think we are. It reminds us that we are all dependent on others more than we sometimes care to admit. It reminds us that all of us enter into life and leave life fully dependent on others. **Throughout our lives, God is systematically stripping away from us those things in which we think we have security, peace, and lasting life: our possessions, our health, our youth and beauty, the people we love, positions of**

power and prestige, and yes, sometimes even our minds, even our intelligence, even our identity. All of this in order that God may finally and completely fashion us in the image of his Son raised to life that does not end. All of this in order that God may fill us with Himself forever. We are capable—even when we are healthy, free of mental disease—of forgetting who we truly are before God. That’s what sin is.

We also learn something else from people with these terrible diseases of the mind. We learn about the care that we are to exercise for one another, for all those on the journey with us. The more dependent, the more vulnerable, the weaker members of our community are, the "poor ones" of the Lord, the more they deserve from us the greatest respect and care, because they are closest to what God's Son became for the sake of our salvation. **They are given to us to teach us the way to salvation: dependence on God alone.**

How do people with these debilitating mental diseases remember, how do they participate in salvation? Keck says that the Church, the community of disciples, through its traditions, its liturgy, its doctrine, performs in religion the same tasks caregivers do for the body. The faithful caregiver continues to groom and care for the person he/she loves even when that person is no longer able to remember who they are or to whom they belong. Keck interviewed a caregiver and was asked why he took such loving care of his wife for so long even though she didn’t even remember who he was. He simply said, “I remember.”

We imitate our God who Scripture says never forgets, even if everyone else does. Do you remember those poignant words of Isaiah. **“Zion said, ‘The Lord has forsaken me, my God has forgotten me.’ ‘but,’ says the Lord, ‘can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb?’** *(Well, yes, she can—that’s what dementia is all about. But the prophet, speaking for God, continues)* **“Even should she forget, I will never forget you. See, I have written your names on the palms of my hands.”**

The Pastoral Care Council of St. Odilia has embraced the idea of this parish becoming a Dementia Friendly Community. Such a parish accepts and values people regardless of cognitive abilities and offers opportunities for both spiritual and pastoral support so that those with impairment can enjoy being a part of a worshipping community. We are now a member of the North Central Consortium of **The Gathering**, operated and managed by Lyngblomsten Services, Inc. in partnership with more than 20 churches throughout the area. The Gathering is a weekly program that provides brain-stimulating

activities for those with memory loss and gives a day of respite to their caregivers, who also receive support and resources from the program. Our membership in this program coincides with our Parish Mission to extend to all people care, love, encouragement, and help in their time of need. This includes both the caregivers and their loved ones who suffer from these devastating diseases of the mind. Our participation is made possible by a grant from the St. Odilia Endowment Fund.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr. Phillip J. Cook". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent initial "F".