"FOOD FOR THOUGHT: THE TASTE OF MEMORY"

Deuteronomy 16:1-12; Psalm 78:1-8
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Marcel Proust's autobiographical novel *Remembrance of Things Past* is the longest novel ever written. In case you think you might want to put it on your reading list, I'll warn you: it's seven volumes, about 4,000 pages. If you want to know more about it, you could ask Pastor Jerry; I suspect that he's one of the handful of people who've actually read it the whole thing. ☺ But even though few readers are ambitious enough to tackle this work, **lots** of people have read or heard about one particular, very famous scene from this novel. What happens in this scene is simply that the main character, who is telling the story, has tea with his mother. With the tea, she serves him a madeleine, which is a small, light, cake-like French cookie, flavored with vanilla and baked in a mold shaped like a scallop shell. He dips the madeleine in his tea, takes a bite and is immediately transported by a feeling of joy that brings on a flood of memories of visiting his aunt (who also fed him madeleines) and the sights and smells and sound of her house, and the village she lived in, and the countryside, and on and on (described at some length). Yes, in a 4,000 page novel, *this* is the one and only bit that is widely known.

It's the universality of this story that's made this *the* emblematic scene in Proust's massive work. Nearly everybody understands it, on a visceral level. For you, it might not be madeleine's (well it probably isn't, since that's not a thing most of us grew up eating!), but you probably have those tastes or those special foods that instantly evoke memories and associations. Something your grandmother baked. What you ate for afterschool snacks as a kid. Summer produce – corn or tomatoes or berries – fresh from the garden. Sometimes these are shared tastes and memories: in our family, popovers remind us of a particular spot in Maine; a French breakfast puff muffin is the taste of Christmas morning; our biscuit recipe is Grandma Dolly's.

Those little moments, those tastes of happy – or even bittersweet – memories – they're gifts. Probably we ought to notice them more, pause to be grateful. Those moments connect us, not just with our past and with people and places we've loved, but with ourselves. They tell us something about who we are and where we've come from and what's important enough to have become embedded deeply into our body's memory.

Why does this happen? There's a neurological basis for it. Scientists say that the parts of the brain that receive and interpret messages from our taste buds (and also our sense of smell) are closely connected to the areas in the brain involved in emotional learning and memory. It's no wonder that this is such a universally human experience. It also explains why food plays such a big part in tradition and ceremony and ritual - throughout the world in many different cultures. Food is a powerful means of connecting people with an identity, a history, a culture, a belief system, a spirituality. It's one thing to talk about stuff like that; it's another for it to be represented by something you can touch and hold and smell and taste – something you can literally *take in*. It makes the past real in the now. This is exactly how we understand the Lord's Supper, right?

So you can see why food came to be so important for the people of Israel's remembering of the most significant turning point in their history. The deliverance from slavery in Egypt to be a free people belonging to the God who brought them out was their defining story. It expressed where they came from, who they were, and why they mattered. It had to be told and retold, generation after generation; and not just *told* but embraced and experienced. What better way than with shared foods, shared tastes connected to that collective memory? The details of the ritual evolved over time (had already evolved some by the time Deuteronomy was written) to become the Passover seder meal celebrated today. In Deuteronomy 16, only the Passover lamb is mentioned, along with unleavened bread, which is referred to as "the bread of affliction." It's supposed to be a reminder of that time of crisis when they had to flee from Egypt in haste, with no time to wait for bread to rise.

The text goes right on to provide directions for another festival, seven weeks later (referred to here as the "Festival of Weeks" and in the New Testament as "Pentecost.") This one is a harvest festival, a time for gratitude. And the instructions give the reason for all this: "Remember that you were a slave in Egypt."

It seems entirely natural that food would be a means of this remembering. But what really strikes me about this is that the remembering here very intentionally encompasses the good and the bad. The bread is "the bread of affliction." Later, the Passover meal will include bitter herbs as a reminder of the bitterness and suffering of slavery.

The Lord's Supper also remembers suffering and sacrifice, as well as a table of grace, community, and life-giving nurture… and that familiar ritual of bread and wine has its roots in the Passover traditions.

This idea of remembering is pretty significant in the Hebrew scriptures. Throughout, there are many, many references to the ancestors, the journey to freedom, the covenant God made with them, as well as difficult times. In Psalm 78 we hear that the people of Israel didn't only remember some struggles and suffering; they even remembered their collective failures to live up to their covenant with God.

All of this is different from our inclination. We want to remember the good stuff – the things that make us look good and feel proud, the successes, the times of unity, plenty, and optimism. But the other stuff – struggles, disappointment and loss, painful conflicts, times we've been down (or put down), mistakes and actions we're ashamed of – we are not so eager to remember out loud. We would rather "put all that behind us." We certainly aren't inclined to *commemorate* such things.

It's this way for us as individuals, but it's true in families as well. We pass on the family history that makes us proud and the funny stories and the wise lessons, but there's a *lot* of other stuff we really don't talk about.

It's true in the church, too. Individual congregations as well as the larger church have history that includes both loving community and painful conflict, both the practice of compassion and complicity with evil. But of course, the positive stories make for better PR!

It's true for us as a nation. The American history we were taught turns out to be a story that leaves out a great deal. Our Thanksgiving turkey and cranberries and squash evoke stories of pilgrims, harvests, and gratitude… but probably ought to remind us of a larger story that includes greed and genocide and attempted erasure of indigenous cultures. A 4th of July picnic is a celebration of freedom, but could rightly also serve to remind us that as a country we've done many things, made deliberate choices, to keep some of our fellow citizens from sharing in the fruits of that freedom.

The things we might not want to remember are as important to remember as the memories we cherish. Because they are just as much part of who we are. When we deny them, we deny a part of our identity. When we avoid them, we give up the opportunity for deeper self-understanding. When we bury them, we deprive ourselves of the full story of our humanity.

The difficult memories and stories offer us opportunities to learn from mistakes of the past, maybe to repent and make amends. We need them in order to understand the ways the past has shaped the present, and the ways it might even still be harming us - or others.

What's more, when we don't acknowledge the memory of struggles, we rob ourselves of the opportunities to reflect on the ways we grew stronger, who walked through it with us, what we learned, and how God's grace sustained us.

The people of Israel long, long ago, somehow understood this. The brutal honesty of some of the memories they kept and passed on astonishes me. That takes a certain courage. How were they able to do this? Only, I think, because of one conviction that runs through their whole story, all their memories: the realization that God was faithful. Whether they were faithful, deserving, and grateful, or not, God loved them. When you understand that, deeply understand it, you can accept the bitter memories that bring tears along with the sweet ones that bring smiles, the stories that are complicated along with the funny ones, the stuff that puzzles you along with what inspires, the past we need to mourn and learn from as well as the history to be proud of.

When we trust in God's faithfulness, and God's grace, we can grapple with truths that are hard to acknowledge – and we can know that we don't have to be afraid of them, because ultimately the ground we stand on is not any comfortable story we have told ourselves, but the love of God. Remembering God's faithfulness reminds us that God's grace is upholding us even now, as we do our best (even if our best is imperfect) to incorporate what we've learned into our actions, words, and thinking.

And then we can be people pass on the story – all the stories – of all the times and ways God has been present to us … with all messiness, heartbreak, beauty, mystery, sorrow, and joy or those stories. Thanks be to our ever-faithful God, for all the gifts of memory. Amen.