

Message: Our First, Greatest Love**Have you ever known anyone with amnesia?**

The movie *The Vow* is based on a true story, the marriage of Krickitt and Kim Carpenter. They had a whirlwind romance in 1993 and married. But just 10 weeks later, while traveling to see family for Thanksgiving, Krickitt and Kim were involved in a terrible auto accident. She suffered a severe head injury and was in a coma for twenty-one days. When Krickitt woke up, she had lost 18 months of memory. That means she didn't remember meeting, dating or marrying her husband Kim. And Kim had lost the woman he once knew as his wife.

Krickitt has never regained those memories. The recovery process was difficult, particularly when she resented the stranger. At one point, she told him she “hated him and he should go back to where he came from.”¹ Yet the couple remained committed to their original wedding vows. That's where the movie varies from real life. In the movie, the couple divorced and there was no mention of their faith in Jesus Christ. In real life, Krickitt and Kim remained married and they relied on their faith to help them in the recovery process. They fell in love all over again and in 1996, they renewed their wedding vows.

When asked by Family Life how they felt about their story being shared, Kim said, “God had a plan.... He is using us to glorify Him, which we know is what we are here for. There are just all kinds of things through this whole story that illuminate God's hand in it all. It's been so refreshing to be able to see that. Our security guard saw the movie at our premiere and he came up to me crying and said, ‘I just want to tell you ... I'm going to make it right with my wife.’”²

The Carpenters gave their concerns to God. They trusted God at his Word that things will work out for good. When you give your problems to God, God's going to do good things. God is going to make things right. In the case of the Carpenters, the story of their life topped the New York Times bestseller list and became a hit movie at the box office. That's not important to Krickitt and Kim, though. They were just keeping their word and praying for something to happen.

¹ www.thevowcarpenters.com/the-story/

² www.familylife.com/articles/topics/marriage/staying-married/commitment/the-true-story-behind-the-vow

Amnesia is a failure of memory. It’s a mysterious thing. It can be caused by trauma, illness, disease, even chemical imbalance. Loss of memory is one of the challenges of those suffering from Alzheimer’s or dementia. The realization that their memory is faulty causes stress for those suffering, their spouses, family and friends.

Spiritual amnesia is also a failure of memory. We forget our first, greatest love (Revelation 2:3-5). We forget God. When we forget who we are, God’s children, we lose our memory of what God has done for us. We forget our call to reach out to those who don’t know Jesus. “We forget that worship isn’t just a time to feel comfortable and safe, but when we come into the presence of God who leads us out into the world. When we have spiritual amnesia, we forget those who have gone before us, showing us how we can make the good news of Jesus available in new and compelling ways to those who most need to hear it.”³

“Do you feel like you’re just maintaining life where you are and that you’re just trying to keep your head above water...?”⁴ That’s a sign of spiritual amnesia, when we’re walking in a spiritual desert, with little sign of the refreshing water of life we so desperately crave and need. Psalm 63:1 describes it: “*O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.*” We’ve all felt that way at times.

Spiritual amnesia is something we struggle with as individuals, congregations, denominations and as the church in the world. When they become more concerned with institutional survival and personal comfort, congregations stagnate, decline, lose their vitality and eventually die. I don’t know about you, but I love the United Methodist Church. Yes, the church has it’s problems, but the message of God’s love and grace, focused on building faithful communities with open hearts, open doors and open minds speaks uniquely to the world.

There’s good news: God is gracious to us. God knows we suffer from spiritual amnesia. God knows we’re forgetful. God knows we’re self-centered. God knows that we forget to seek his presence. We need to remember who our God is and trust God to meet all our needs.

³ Paul Nixon, *Healing Spiritual Amnesia*, 2004

⁴ <http://cmbonline.org/weekly-devotion/do-you-ever-have-spiritual-amnesia/>

2 Corinthians 3:17-18 tells us that the Spirit of the Lord leads to freedom as we are transformed into the image of God. Still anxious?

Philippians 4:6 reminds us, "*Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.*"

God gives us memorials to help us. God gives us reminders. God gave us the Word, the Bible, which is a record of humanity's experience of God to remind us. Jesus gave us his life, the church and a call to mission. The Holy Spirit gives us a hunger and thirst for a spiritual life. The Bible says, "*I will meditate on all your work and muse on your mighty deeds*" (Psalm 77:12). God even wrote his word on our hearts and minds to help us remember who God is (Hebrews 8:10-11).

That's important. The counterpoint to spiritual amnesia is to build on memorable experiences. Psalm 9:1 teaches it will give us pleasure, "*I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds.*" When we remember the ways God is present in our lives, we're filled with love and gratitude. When we see and hear the ways God is present in our families' lives and in our community of faith, we're encouraged and grateful. When we share the ways God is present in our community of faith, we're inspired and hopeful.

These are all ways God reminds us we're in a covenant relationship with him. "When God makes a covenant with us, God says: 'I will love you with an everlasting love. I will be faithful to you, even when you run away from me, reject me, or betray me.' In our society we don't speak much about covenants. We speak about contracts. When we make a contract with a person, we say: 'I will fulfill my part as long as you fulfill yours. When you don't live up to your promises, I no longer have to live up to mine.' Contracts are often broken because the partners are unwilling or unable to be faithful to their terms.

But God didn't make a contract with us. God made a covenant with us, and God wants our relationships with one another to reflect that covenant. That's why marriage, friendship and life in community are all

ways we see God's faithfulness in our lives."⁵ These are the markers and milestones of spiritual life.

Our relationship with God is at the heart of a spiritual life. Our relationship with God encompasses all aspects of our being, physical and spiritual. Before we can transform the world as disciples of Christ, we must be willing to be transformed personally and as a congregation. If we don't remember God and share our experiences together, inspiring and building each other up, what do we have to offer the world?

I know that sharing experiences works. When I was in my late teens, my grandmother was suffering from Alzheimer's and dementia. She rarely knew my parents' names. The last time I saw her before she died, I sat and talked with her. I told my grandmother stories of how I remembered her in my life from a young child to the present. At the end of that time, I told her how much I loved her. I'll never forget: she looked at me and said, "I love you too - Eric!" I give God the glory.

It's clear: the stories we share aren't about an institution. They aren't about a denomination or buildings or things at all. The stories we share are about how Jesus touched that person's heart and changed them. We tell stories about how Jesus touched this person's body to heal. We tell stories about how Jesus touched our spirit and quenched our hunger and thirst for more. We tell stories about how Jesus, our Savior, Teacher, Lord and Friend, changed our lives for the better. Through these stories, we remember, we turn our hearts and minds to God, and our spirit is fed. Storytelling is one of the spiritual practices we can learn and embrace.

Spiritual practices are ways we learn what it means to be in a relationship with God. They are new and exciting ways to help us learn and grow, personally, as a family and as a community. Over the next six weeks together, we'll examine what spirituality means. And we'll explore and try different spiritual practices so we can all learn new ways to share and experience God's love together. Along the way, we'll remind ourselves of the memorials God has given us, filling us with gratitude for who God is and what God has done for us.

⁵ *Henri Nouwen Society devotional, March 3, 2017*

Centuries ago, Saint Augustine confessed to God, “You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” We may feel anxiety or hesitation, but I invite you to bring those feelings along on our exploration. Some will evaporate as we come to recognize more about God and ourselves. Others may remain. We need to be gentle with our fears. Only by testing our experience over time can we learn to trust the great love of the One whose grace transforms us in ways that surpass our wildest dreams. In that gentle, steadfast way, we will once again remember our first, and greatest love, Jesus Christ.

I pray for God to open our hearts and minds in Jesus’ name, amen.

Psalm 63:1 (NRSV)

O God, you are my God, I seek you,
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

2 Corinthians 3:17-18 (NRSV)

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

John 16:12-15 (NRSV)

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.