

News Site Focuses on Spirituality in Those With Dementia

The Wired Word for the Week of January 27, 2019

In the News

Jesus once commented that the poor will always be with us (Mark 14:7), but he might have made a similar statement that we will always have with us those suffering from various forms of dementia, such as Alzheimer's or Creutzfeldt-Jakob diseases.

Dementia is a loss of memory and a decline in thinking ability. At our present stage of medical science, those losses are progressive and irreversible. Dementia is a grim reality that many of us have had to learn about because a loved one has been afflicted with it.

An estimated four million to five million Americans currently have dementia. Most, but not all, are elderly.

This month, *Religion News Service* released a series of articles about dementia and religion (two of the articles are included in the links list below). One article told of geropsychologist Benjamin Mast, who counsels people who have received a diagnosis of dementia. Mast said some ask him, "What if I forget God?"

While we might quickly answer that God won't forget them, the concern is real for some in the early stages of dementia. The article, however, explained that after such persons do pass the point where meaningful discussions about God no longer seem possible, the part of their memory that remains intact the longest is that which was learned early in life and was held the longest. For many, that includes prayers, hymns, creeds, scripture passages and church liturgies with which those persons had interacted often.

Some TWW team members told of eyewitness experiences of such phenomena. Team member John Coulson told of his grandfather who had Alzheimer's and could not remember his wife or any of his children or grandchildren but was able to recite Philippians 4. "The inspiration and poignancy of that has always stayed with me," Coulson said.

Team member Frank Ramirez said, "When I visited my father in the nursing home a few months before his death, he could not recall people, but when the visiting minister -- a Catholic lay person who brings Communion to shut-ins -- came to visit him, he knew the responses for Communion."

And team member Stan Purdum tells of his mother in her 90s, deep in dementia, who didn't seem to recognize her husband of 68 years or any of her children, and whose comments seldom made sense, but she could still recite the names of the 66 books of the Bible, in order.

Mast said, "If you ask a person who's been deeply affected by Alzheimer's about something that happened yesterday, you're going to their weakness in terms of memory. But if we can engage them, for example, in the context of faith services with older songs and hymns that they've known for many years, we're meeting them where they're strong."

Religious practices, particularly those that employ the traditional parts of worship and religious practices, can be a way to engage persons with dementia and offer them ministry and the care of God.

Ken Clasper, who wrote a blog about his experiences of living with Lewy Body Dementia, told of deciding not to go to church any longer because the changed liturgy in the services didn't connect with what he could remember. As an example, he mentioned going to church one day, and realizing that he no longer remembered the Lord's Prayer.

"I was totally devastated at this, and try as I might, I just could not remember the words," Clasper said, calling that "very upsetting."

But he worked on it for a few months, going over and over the words. "I started to get to grips with it, and I felt really proud of myself," Clasper said.

However, the next time he and his wife went to church, he found the service that day was using a different version of the Lord's Prayer, and in some subsequent services, the prayer was sung instead of recited, something Clasper could not do.

To add insult to injury, when Clasper raised the issue of the word changes, he was accused of staying with the past and not keeping up with modern times.

Some churches *are* finding ways to bring spiritual sustenance to people with dementia, even to those whose memories are far gone. Ramirez, who is a pastor, comments, "I use a traditional form of The Lord's Prayer in worship, Luke 2:1-20 in the King James Version at Christmas, and Psalm 23 in KJV at funerals because that particular language is important to many participants. It seems as if the rhythm and sound of the language supersedes the importance of understanding and interpretation."

That rhythm and sound may be especially important when one can no longer contemplate the meaning of the words.

Other churches offer spiritual sustenance to dementia sufferers through simple worship services, often in nursing homes, with old hymns, traditional prayers, even including props attendees can hold (see the article "Songs and Stuffed Animals Instead of Sermons" in the list below.)

God hasn't forgotten those with dementia, and there are ways to communicate that.

More on this story can be found at these links:

Dementia and Religion: 'What If I forget About God?' *Religion News Service*

Dementia and Religion: Songs and Stuffed Animals Instead of Sermons. *Religion News Service*

Dementia and Religion. *Dementia Alliance International*

The Big Questions

1. Why do you think God enables some people with dementia to connect with old hymns, creeds, traditional prayers and Bible verses that somehow linger in their minds even after they have forgotten who they and their loved ones are?
2. What aspect of your thinking ability would you most fear losing? Why? Does trusting God help you in any way as you contemplate your own possible memory loss?
3. If you have had experience with someone with dementia, share one aspect of the condition that was particularly difficult for that individual or the caregiver(s). What surprised you most about that experience? What coping techniques or skills were most helpful to those involved?

4. How can your church effectively assist those caring for persons with dementia? How can Christians help people with dementia?
5. In what sense is memory an essential part of the Christian faith?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Psalm 106:4

Remember me, O LORD, when you show favor to your people; help me when you deliver them ... (For context, read 106:1-5).

Several verses in the Bible refer to God "remembering" are prayers of individuals asking for God to "remember" them.

A possible problem with those references is that they might be read as implying that God can also "forget." It's best to remind ourselves that speaking of God "remembering" is an anthropomorphic practice (the attribution of human characteristics or behavior to God) and not an actual description of how God functions.

Even the original Hebrew word underlying the English "remember" in these verses anthropomorphizes God. The Hebrew is *zakar*, which, when applied to God means something like "to bring someone to mind and then act upon that person's behalf."

But it's probably impossible for us to speak of God without using terms that describe human activity, and the idea of God having us in mind can be comforting, especially to those who have worshiped him throughout their lives. He does have us in mind.

Questions: What does it mean to you that God has you "in mind"? On what level do you think that connects with people who cannot remember God? Do you think it matters if people with dementia can connect with God so long as God can connect with them?

Psalm 137:5-6

If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy. (For context, read 137:1-9.)

Psalm 137 is a lament from someone who was among those forced out of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army and into exile in Babylon. Although the psalm does not refer to dementia, its author worries he will, in the present vivid experience of the exile, forget what he is grieving about.

Questions: If you were to lose memory, what memories do you most fear losing? Why? Were you ever surprised by a realization you had forgotten the fervor that first excited you about your faith?

Proverbs 22:6

Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray. (No context needed.)

As we've indicated, sometimes a person with severe dementia may be able to recite the Lord's Prayer, a scripture passage or liturgy memorized in the distant past, or sing along with a favorite hymn.

People with dementia tend to forget things in reverse order. They can't remember more recent things but often do have some memory of things from the earlier part of their lives. Those who learned scripture or hymns at an early age are more likely to have those resources available should dementia strike later in life, for they are "hidden in our hearts" (see Psalm 119:11, NIV).

Questions: When you were young, what scripture or other sacred material did you learn as part of your spiritual development and training? Which Bible passages, hymns or other sacred material do you think would be helpful even after you forgot most other things?

Deuteronomy 6:4-7

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. (For context, read 6:1-9.)

Questions: What scripture verses and/or religious liturgies and songs would you want to teach young children today to help them later in life? What are you and/or your Christian Ed department teaching now to the youngest children (which they may remember longest) and why?

Psalm 71:5-6, 9, 17-18

For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O LORD, from my youth. Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother's womb. My praise is continually of you. ... Do not cast me off in the time of old age; do not forsake me when my strength is spent. ... O God, from my youth you have taught me, and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds. So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me, until I proclaim your might to all the generations to come. ... (For context, read 71:1-24.)

The psalmist declares that God is his hope from birth "even to old age and gray hairs" and that even "from the depths of the earth you will bring me up again" (v. 20), anticipating the resurrection from the dead. He prays that he might be able to proclaim God's greatness and faithfulness to future generations with songs of praise accompanied by harp and lyre.

Questions: What do the words of the psalmist tell us about the role of self-reliance and the role of dependence on God? Since at any time disease could rob us of our ability to proclaim God's "wondrous deeds" and "might," when and how should God's people speak "to all the generations to come"?