

“We are our memories”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*2 Corinthians 4:16-5:1 and John 14:1-7, 25-27*

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

In the 2017 Disney and Pixar movie *Coco*, a twelve-year-old boy, Miguel, is magically whisked out of this world and into the land of the dead. There, he meets his ancestors, who are part of a bright and colorful city. They have parties; they dance; they sing; they even visit their families on Dia De Los Muertos. Though dead, they live on—but only as long as someone among the living remembers them. If they are forgotten, they disappear forever.

Miguel’s mission is to get back to the land of the living so that he can save his great-great-grandfather from being forgotten. He finds his great-grandmother Coco, crumpled in a chair, long white braids encasing her wrinkled face, her eyes staring absently, unresponsive. She is very old, and is on the verge of losing her last memory of her father. Miguel fears he is too late, and sadly picks up his great-great-grandfather’s guitar. He sings a very old song to Coco, a song her father sang to her as a child: “Remember me / though I have to say goodbye / remember me / don’t let it make you cry / for, ever if I’m far away / I hold you in my heart / I sing a secret song to you.” As Coco hears the music, she lifts her weary head, whispers the words, and suddenly, her face transforms into a smile. She remembers.

That memory saves her father.

It is a beautiful moment in a beautiful film, but I can’t help but feel sad. What about those who do not remember?

I think of my grandmother, my mom’s mom, with her freckles and fiery red hair and long thin fingers that danced along piano keys. She helped raise me; taught me to love green and growing things; sang in the church choir for more than 50 years; the daughter of a pastor, the pinnacle of faith and kindness; swam every day at the Y, traveled, was full of life—until in her early 80s, she began to forget little things, which grew into big things and into a diagnosis of Alzheimer’s. At the end, she didn’t know who I was. She couldn’t bathe or feed herself, let alone play the piano or sing or pray. This great woman became so small. I remember the toll it took on my mom, caring for her, watching her slip away, and how my mom didn’t know how to grieve a woman who was stuck in a place in between life and death. My grandmother’s body was working just fine, her lungs were breathing, her heart pumping, but she wasn’t there, because her memories weren’t there.

We are our memories: where we’ve been, what we’ve experienced and learned, who we’ve loved, the books we’ve read, the music we’ve danced to, the God we’ve worshiped. Without these memories, who are we? Do we just disappear?

Alzheimer's is the sixth leading cause of death in the United States. It has no cure. A degenerative brain disease involving cell damage, Alzheimer's is the most common but not the only cause of dementia. The newest memories are the first to go. As it becomes more severe, the person can become disoriented and experience behavior and personality changes; even speaking, swallowing, and walking can become difficult. For the patient, it is terrifying, while loved ones and caregivers discover a unique grief and exhaustion. "On average, caregivers spend 70 hours a week providing care."<sup>1</sup> "Eighty percent of caregivers report stress, anxiety, and depression... and are more likely to get Alzheimer's themselves."<sup>2</sup>

In her book *Slow Dancing with a Stranger*, Meryl Comer shares the story of her husband's early onset Alzheimer's at age 58. The man who once directed hematology and oncology research at the National Institutes of Health can no longer remember his name. Now he sits in a wheelchair, unable to speak. But for a time he wore shin guards to prevent injury as he endlessly paced. His house became equipped with mirrors, so that Meryl could see him coming and be warned of his violent outbursts. He'd clench his fists so tight that his fingernails would become blue.

"Sometimes," she writes, "wanting to recapture the sound and vigor of his lost voice, I pressed the message on our answering machine. Over and over I heard him say, 'Hello, Meryl and I are not home right now.'" And all she could think was: No, we're not.

If we are our memories, then it's easy to think that when our memories go, so do we. But what if we could remember each other back into existence? This is the whole premise of the movie *Coco*: not that *we* have to remember in order to survive, but that someone else has to. We can remember *for* each other. My grandmother may not have been able to remember who she was, but I could. I could hold her alive in my memory. I could sing the songs she had forgotten, recite the Scripture, page through the photo albums. And sometimes, it would revive something in her. But even when it didn't, I could come to her, as one who believed that my remembered grandmother—the spirit of her—was still there, in her. Author Carol Howell writes, "They cannot enter your world, but you can enter their world."<sup>3</sup> We can create new moments of joy, of laughter and tenderness, of music and sunshine, new memories (even if they won't remember them). Moments become everything.

It is a powerful calling: to be each other's memories. But there is a problem. Our memories are subjective. The woman I remember as my grandmother is surely not the same woman she would remember. If it were up to me to put her back together again according to my memories, invariably she would come back different; she would come back wrong. She wouldn't be *her*; she would be my version of her.

But what if there is another who also remembers, another who knows us intimately and precisely? What if there is One who has an exact copy of our memories, down to the moment we tasted strawberry ice cream for the first time or climbed that tree when we were young and fell and scraped our knee?

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Mast, Ph.D., *Second Forgetting*

<sup>2</sup> Meryl Comer, *Slow Dancing with a Stranger*

<sup>3</sup> *Let's Talk Dementia: A Caregiver's Guide*

If there is any hope in Alzheimer's, it is this—that what we forget, God remembers.

“I will not forget you,” declares the Lord through the prophet Isaiah. “See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands” (49:15-16). The same hands that shaped us and loved us all our lives, carried us even when we didn't know it, hands nailed to a cross, hands that rolled away a stone, these are the hands that remember us. They forget not a breath.

This is good news for all people. For, we are always forgetting. How many times in the past week did we forget God, or each other, or what we should be grateful for? Our brain is constantly discarding memories. And eventually, we all forget. That is life. That is death. The only hope is the One who sees and remembers us as we truly are. It's our divine flash drive. We can be rebooted. Our memory is stored in God.

Perhaps this is part of what Jesus means when he tells his disciples that he goes to prepare a place for them—or what Paul means when he says that “if our earthly tent is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with human hands, but eternal in the heavens.”

We may forget, but God never will. Everything lost will be found.

That memory is powerful. It is resurrection memory, the kind of memory sanctified by Jesus Christ when, during the Last Supper, he said, “Do this in remembrance of me.” The kind of memory that can pick up the fragments and make them whole again.

That's what *Coco* gets wrong. The perpetuity of our existence does not rely on human memory; it relies on God's.

I'm not just talking about heaven; I'm talking about right now. In that same passage from the Gospel of John, Jesus says that the Holy Spirit will “remind you,” not only in death, but in life. Every day, God is remembering us to ourselves, reminding us of who we are, and of who God is. This is what happens in prayer, in love, in worship and Communion: a re-remembering, a reconstituting, literally God putting us back together again.

I wonder: What would happen if we looked upon that person with Alzheimer's, or they upon themselves, and saw not just a forgetting, but a remembering? What if we saw the person God remembers—the child who liked to jump in puddles on a rainy day, the teenager terrified of her first kiss, the teacher grading papers late into the night, the mother reading stories to her babies, the woman who wept beneath the Sistine Chapel, the one who laughed at silly comedies, the one who grew old and never stopped loving this life, even when it was hard? What if we heard the same song *Coco* hears—“Remember me / though I have to say goodbye / remember me / don't let it make you cry / for, ever if I'm far away / I hold you in my heart / I sing a secret song to you”? And what if it's been God all along, God singing us back into life? **Amen.**

*P.S. Rev. Janet Newman was inspired by the sermon to offer this truly lovely reflection: “Maybe in dementia, we release our memories to God for safekeeping.” I love this thought.*