

Memory and the Construction of Identity
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Sermon Synopsis: What do you remember of your growing up? What do you remember of your adolescence and your early adulthood, and if you are as old as me (67yrs) all of those years in-between? Part of what we do as human beings is construct our identity, our sense of self, or who we are and what we remember becomes the chapters in that construction. Today we will look at how memories are formed, what episodic memory is, and how what we remember becomes the narrative composing the “story of me” and the “story of us,” and who we hold ourselves to be.

OPENING WORDS: Isaiah 55:6-7

Lord, You have been our ^[a]dwelling place in all generations.
 Before the mountains were brought forth,
 Or ever You had formed the earth and the world,
 Even from everlasting to everlasting, You *are* God.
 The days of our lives *are* seventy years;
 And if by reason of strength *they are* eighty years,
 Yet their boast *is* only labor and sorrow;
 For it is soon cut off, and we fly away.
 So teach *us* to number our days,
 That we may gain a heart of wisdom.

READING: “*How Ted Koppel’s trip to ‘Mayberry’ turned into one of 2021’s most striking moments of TV*, Emily Yahr, for the Washington Post, December 29, 2021
 Retrieved at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2021/12/29/ted-koppel-mayberry-cbs-sunday-morning/>

At the height of the coronavirus pandemic lockdowns, veteran journalist Ted Koppel was working out on the treadmill when he came across an episode of “The Andy Griffith Show” — it caught his attention because of something he heard earlier that day while listening to WMAL, a Virginia-based conservative talk radio station. A listener had called in to explain that they used to live in the Washington area, but couldn’t stand how “woke” it had become, so they fled to the South. They said something along the lines of, “We moved down here to the Carolinas, and boy, life is just wonderful. People are so lovely. They’re so neighborly. Everything is so nice.”

Koppel, 81, started thinking about how “The Andy Griffith Show” was also set in the Carolinas, in the fictional town of Mayberry, N.C.... [and] while Mayberry was not real, the city of Mount Airy, N.C., claims to be the prototype on which it was based, and still draws thousands of tourists every year looking to relive their beloved show.

So Koppel..., now a senior contributor to “CBS Sunday Morning,”... travel[ed] down to Mount Airy. Koppel was curious: What made the show so popular? And what was it about this community that makes people want to come visit decades later?

What started with... general questions wound up... [as] one of the most striking TV segments of the year [about] the fierce nostalgia for a time and place that literally never existed...

“People looking back at that program seem to confuse the program with what reality was like in those days, wishing that we could only restore some of the good feelings, some of the kindness, some of the decency,” Koppel said in an interview. “But what they’re really reflecting on is not what was going on in a particular North Carolina community. What they’re reflecting on is what was going on in the creative minds of a bunch of scriptwriters out in Hollywood...”

[What they’re remembering was what they considered] an antidote to everything going on in the world at the time...: Tens of thousands of American troops killed in Vietnam War. Race riots throughout the country. Assassinations.

“If there’s any period that matches our current period in terms of how terrible things were and how difficult things were, the 1960s were it,” Koppel said.

Koppel’s 13-minute segment... aired [last] September on “CBS Sunday Morning”... Kick[ed] off with the cheerful, whistled theme song, cameras show the Andy Griffith Museum and a vintage police car [in Mt. Airy]... [but took] a darker, more serious turn as Koppel interviews one man who says our “godless society” could use a dose of the good old days. “Back when neighbors were neighbors, and they provided for everybody else,” the man explained.

“What you’re saying is true of certain people,” Koppel tells him. “If you were Black in the ‘60s, things were not all that good.”

“That’s true,” the man admits.

Koppel also interviews a Black family who had lived in Mount Airy for decades, and as of the early 1970s, were turned away from eating in certain restaurants. Yet the siblings had all returned to their hometown. “Somehow Mount Airy becomes more complex with each conversation,” Koppel said, adding that the town “is a place where fantasy and reality intersect.”

Tourists talk to Ted Koppel in a trolley in Mount Airy, N.C.... [and] Koppel... just let the scene speak for itself. At one point, a tour guide comments: “... conversation about politics and division is what people come here to get away from. We don’t care what color you are. We don’t even care what your politics are. We just want to be good neighbors and treat everybody alike. And that’s why they’re coming here.” The tourists yell “Amen!” and applaud. “That’s what America should be,” [another] says. [In a later interview on the segment, Koppel noted]: ‘You do need to understand that what you’re looking at here is not the original community that the show was — the show was not shot here. It wasn’t about this place... But people shouldn’t be hurt if somebody reminds them that they’re not dealing with reality.’”

SERMON

Thursday, I forgot to take my daily morning pills. I didn’t realize that until Friday morning when I looked in my pill case, emptied the pills in the Friday slot, and saw the Thursday slot still filled.

I'll forget only occasionally but what made this different is I realized I have no recollection of the sequence of ordinary events that are usually so routine as not to be remembered. I couldn't remember how or that I had forgotten. It yielded a small, momentary panic involving identity. I couldn't remember being out of an ordinary sequence, and felt immediately but only momentarily a loss of who I am.

We rarely register and log into our memory for most of the events and activities of an ordinary day. Think of your drive here. How many different trees, homes, sidewalks, businesses you passed to get here that don't register deep enough to remember? And think of the number of people you've met in your life and I would bet you can't remember many of their names let alone facial features and sound of their voices. To note we can't remember the names and faces we've forgotten, is more than pointing out the obvious. It is to ask, what is memory? And especially, what is memory to identity?

Having by-passed the regular driving route a number of years ago to see downtown Mt. Airy, North Carolina, I can tell you I've seen it but can't remember enough to describe much of it. I can sing the high school alma mater of the TV characters of Andy and Barney as I've seen the episode several times but can't sing my own high school alma mater, a school I spend every school day in, for 3 whole years! And what of the comments of the current residents of Mt. Airy about the world they reside in? *Our "godless society" could use a dose of the good old days. "Back when neighbors were neighbors, and they provided for everybody else",, [or] "We don't care what color you are. We don't even care what your politics are. We just want to be good neighbors and treat everybody alike. And that's why [tourists come] here."* [or] *"That's what America should be."* Does Mt. Airy stand-in for what Ted Koppel described, the "... *place where fantasy and reality intersect.*" Or is it more than fantasy or reality or real-life, involving the way we use memory to construct identity, who we think we were and are?

I don't think the Mt. Airy residents are remembering any America that every existed. But, I don't think it's fantasy either. I think hope shapes how we remember and what we claim to remember, constructing an identity of who we think we are.

Memory is a complex mental operation and to understand it requires some distinctions between brain, mind, self, and consciousness. The brain is a body organ that generates electrical signals that the mind uses to produce thoughts, distinct but related. One can have some of the brain functioning with none of the mind producing thoughts, as in a coma. The brain is like the car and the mind is like the driver, as a car can start remotely. But, the mind cannot produce thoughts without the brain. The car doesn't go anywhere without a driver. Unless it is a driverless car, spelling the end of this as an analogy!

And some of the mind's thoughts construct the self, broken down by what one scholar called the "Me" and the "I." The "Me" is my self that I treat as an object, as in Brent was born in 1954, Brent is married to Pat, Brent forgot his pills last Thursday. The "Me" is the part of the myself I treat as an object I can know and which can evaluate things, like through memory. When I measure if I made a mistake, did I do that right? or did I speak truthfully? But the other part, called by that same scholar the "I," is the part of myself that is a subject experiencing life immediately, now, the feeling part of knowledge like sitting on Muskegon Beach during a warm

summer evening, gentle waves flowing over your feet, watching the sun disappear. But, you see, I just used the “Me,” the self as an object remembered, to generate the feelings of the “I,” the self as subject, because it ain’t summer, it ain’t warm, and the waves ain’t gentle. I merged the “Me,” created by a personal memory of sitting on Muskegon Beach on a summer’s twilight last summer, with the “I,” the subject that experiences and feels when it does sit there at that time that it sits. And to top it all off, I’ve never even been to Muskegon Beach, though I have sat on the Lake Michigan shore!

Consciousness, our sense of who we are, where we are, right now, is intimately involved with the “Me,” the “I,” and the various ways they are merged to create who we think we are, where and when we think we are, now, in the past, as a sequence.

The “Me” as an object that I can conjure up right now from memory – Brent’s best friend when he was 19 was Richard Toumey – gets mixed in with the I” as a subject feeling that constructed memory while sitting at Richard Toumey’s Memorial Service a week ago in Indianapolis. But, the feeling of the “I” is so strong and immediate that I do not think about, reflect upon, evaluate what memory brings forward and the way in which it presents the “Me” incompletely.

Because memory involving time and sequence – called episodic memory, that this event preceded that event and was followed by still this other one – which involves time cells in the hippocampus. The “I” that is the subject, the experiencing self collects impression through time cells that begin firing when an event occurs, “the mechanisms for encoding time and memory,” neuroscientist Leila Reddy says. But we don’t understand yet how the mind breaks the code, producing thoughts of events remembered, constructing the “Me’s” point of view made up of what is remembered, spotty as it may be, and what we feel immediately as the hope of what we wanted the events to be. It’s not an integration of fantasy and reality, but the meeting place of memory and hope. And memory is spotty and hope can fill in the holes with what never was.

Actor Rockne Tarkington played retired pro football player Flip Conroy who appeared in an episode of the Andy Griffith show in the 7th season. He was the only black character who spoke in all of the 249 episodes made, which constructed that “world” current residents of Mt Airy claim to remember. Or, as Oprah Winfrey, a huge Andy Griffith Show fan said, apparently Black people didn’t talk much back then, in the South, to white people. Or, appear much apparently. Though North Carolina is the ancestral land of the Cherokee until President Jackson removed most on the Trail of Tears in 1838, no Cherokee characters appear although Aunt Bee did once purchase a bottle of what was called “Indian elixir” from a white traveling salesman. And no Hispanic characters although a 2020 Independent film, “Mayberry Man,” shot and premiering in Danville, Indiana, the self-described “Mayberry of the Midwest” did star comedian Joel Alvarado as a Goober Pyle imitator. Something else frames episodic memories boasting of a time and place that can be seen as an imagining passing through memory, “We don’t care what color you are. We don’t even care what your politics are. We just want to be good neighbors and treat everybody alike. And that’s why they’re coming here.” “Back when neighbors were neighbors, and they provided for everybody else.” Even though not everybody around them was seen or heard.

The “Me” that we remember is constructed from memories the “I” makes in the immediacy of experience, but the I sees and hears only some of the world and then constructs the world the “Me” remembers as if that world is all of the world everywhere. We experience the world through a glass darkly, taking in only part of all the experience there is, but in the “Me” claim it is all of the world, everywhere, universally. Until we ever see things face to face, which for many doesn’t ever happen!

The Psalmist advises to number your days, to think deeply upon you, others, and the time and locations we are in, to understand deeply what you think you are, your identity, as it is shaped by how you think, how your brain works to encode memory, your mind to develop thoughts about who the “Me” was through the incompleteness of what we remember, the narrow perspectives with which we experience the world, but deeply, the “I,” so immediately and deeply as to impress itself in a damaging or healing way, that can devastate or resolve and redeem. Ah, if I could only see and understand from all perspectives, remember all things of all events that have occurred. But, alas, I am like the blade of grass that grows up and withers, and may not even see let alone experience the nearby tree or flower.

BENEDICTION

And now, seeing there is naught to fear, and bearing witness to what can never die, let us go forth in the world in peace.

Be of good courage,
 Search all things
 And hold fast to that which is good.
 Render unto no one evil for evil.
 Strengthen the faint-hearted,
 Support the weak,
 Help the afflicted,
 Love all souls,
 Serving the Most High,
 And rejoicing in the power of the Spirit.