**The Gospel According to *Roma***

An LPCC Sermon Based on Psalm 42

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Twenty years ago, on my way to work, I used to walk past a shuttered cemetery that came right up to the sidewalk on Kalamazoo Ave, in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Very near the sidewalk, standing alone, were three simple stones. The epitaphs read “Francis B. Whitney, 1886-1960;” “Nora Whitney, 1891-1928;” and finally, “Baby Whitney, 1917.”

I noticed the stones first, on a late-winter day, when everything was grey and brown with a glint of frost, when I was surprised to see a bright spray of yellow and red pansies firmly planted just before Baby Whitney’s stone. Looking closer, I realized that the flowers were made of silk.

As I walked on, I wondered about those flowers. Was it possible that someone still remembered Baby Whitney’s birth, eighty years later? But how could that be? And why?

Perhaps a younger brother or sister, someone who was born after Baby Whitney, left the flowers? Or was there no memory here at all, but just someone playing macabre tricks, carefully rearranging flowers for the odd thrill of it? But why?

My curiosity was aroused. Genealogy is one of my hobbies. So, I scoured city records and census records for more information. Other than confirming that Francis Whitney had lived and died in Grand Rapids, and was married to Nora, I found little else. Family memories stretch back perhaps two, maybe even three generations. But as King Solomon once wrote, “The people of long ago are not remembered, nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to come by those who come after them” (Eccl 1:11).

Mary Carruthers, a historian of memory, writes that, “ancient and medieval people reserved *their* awe for memory. Their greatest geniuses they describe as people of superior memories . . . and they regard it as a mark of superior moral character as well as intellect.” Plato’s teacher, the philosopher Socrates, was deeply concerned that the invention of reading and writing would erode our ability to remember and thus make us less human. In ancient days, you cultivated memory.

You see, if you wanted to be a midwife in the days before the printing press and literacy, there were no written manuals to study in classrooms that would turn you into a midwife. No, you had to learn this art from your mother, who probably learned it from her mother’s mother. You learned by watching, by doing as your teacher instructed, and practicing. But you never knew more than what you remembered. There were no books. No internet. No FAQs. Just your memory. Something you cultivated, crated, paid attention to, made a living from, and clung to.

Alfonso Cuarón’s *Roma* is based on his bittersweet memories of growing up with his family, and especially memories of their maid, Cleo. The movie is about how memories make us who we are.

In fact, this movie is all reminisce, a rivulet of time past bubbling into and filling the present. Cuarón remembers both childhood glee and trauma. Interestingly, as viewers, we cannot know how good Cuarón’s memory is, or why he remembers what he does, or even what Cuarón has forgotten; how his memory works, or how our memory works is much more mysterious than we give memory credit for.

Some of Cuarón’s memories are bitter. His father, a doctor, abandons not just his wife, Cuarón’s mother, but the entire family, neglecting the children, not paying the bills, lying to cover his tracks. Cleo, the maid, is often on the receiving end of small slights and harsh words by her masters. She is used by her boyfriend. These memories are not bitter just because of the facts, but because of the emotion attached to these memories, the feelings that are truer for Cuarón than the bare facts, the feelings that shape his attitude to others and to life.

For Cuarón, these bitter memories—the emotional impact of them, that is—inform his present ideals. He will cultivate his memories, dwell in them until he has put them in a place he can live with, learning lessons for life and love along the way. In fact, I think Cuarón has made this movie just to make sure he masters his toxic, emotionally difficult memories so that they won’t subliminally influence his soul without him realizing it.

On the other hand, some of Cuarón’s memories are sweet and a source of strength and encouragement. In our scripture reading, the Psalmist remembers going to the temple of the Lord, having fun there, amid the festal throng. Remembering the good times gives the Psalmist courage and hope for the lonely times he is enduring now. The Psalms are like that, honest, concrete, real about both good times and bad, and how we might handle them. The Psalmist’s memories of going to a temple festival are not so different than Cuarón remembering how the whole extended family gathered for fun and fellowship at a Hacienda, or how his immediate family could sit together on the couch, happily watching TV, before the troubles began.

But even these memories are instructive. The kids had fun, fun, fun at the family Hacienda; but the adults preyed on each other without the kids realizing it. The kids remember the press of warm flesh on the family’s TV couch, but the father was already plotting his exit. Memories—especially good ones of love, and attachment, and kindness, and success—positive memories can be the rock on which we build the house of *self* we inhabit; and toxic memories, even if we cannot recall them, can be the sand upon which our lives collapse.

We think we are the ones who choose what to remember, but in truth, our memories use us, shape us, make us who we are, often without our even realizing it. This is why we must master memory, cultivate it. Memories and the emotions they trigger in us, can be bitter or sweet.

But third, some of Alfonso Cuarón’s memories are actually impossible. Cleo has a miscarriage, and the military government slaughters hundreds of protesting students, scenes that Cuarón cannot have witnessed. But the brain knows how to improvise and fill in the blanks. Many memories end up being the stories we tell ourselves, even without all the facts, and sometimes regardless of the facts.

In one powerful scene, the climax of the movie, the maid Cleo is left on the beach with the children, who venture into the water. The undertow catches them. They can’t make it back to shore. They are going to drown. But Cleo, who cannot herself swim, wades in, waves washing over her, plucks first one, and then another out of the water, saving their lives at great risk to her own.

Ultimately, Cuarón’s memories are like those waves—they are angry and bitter, in danger of taking him away, of leaving him overwhelmed by the past. And at the same time, his own memory of that terrible day on the beach is especially sweet for the love that was expressed in Cleo’s courage, and in all the children in a tangle of hugs and embraces with Cleo on the beach. Because they remember Cleo’s love, given freely and at great risk, Cuarón and the entire family can build a life in and for each other secure in the knowledge that they need not do it all alone.

In sum? Cultivate your memories.

Remember, most memories are stories we tell ourselves to make sense of our world, part fact, part reconstruction, part convenient forgetting. The brain actively grows and nourishes the old stories we tell about ourselves, so that we will come out looking good. Be aware of this trick, and make allowances for it. You are not always the hero or the exemplary person that you remember yourself as, nor are others always the villains you suppose they must have been.

Some memories, like the Psalmists, are sweet. Harvest them. Enjoy them. Let them sustain you. Don’t worry too much about how accurate they are, so long as they are true who you want to be.

Other memories are bitter. You might want to prune these, in spite of the work it requires, discarding those that don’t somehow help make you a happier or wiser person, but meanwhile, not forgetting them so much that you cannot hang on to the critical lessons and insights you gained in spite of the pain. Other memories are a subtle mix of sweet and bitter, as when Jesus said, “Do this in remembrance of me.”

Finally, some memories influence us even though we are hardly aware of them—like poisons or fertilizer under the soil. These memories—whether they are the sort that fluff us up or bring us down—these memories are especially tricky. But here’s a hint. If someone you love or trust suggests that you should explore these past events, or if you recognize that sometimes you are unaccountably emotionally triggered by people or events all out of proportion to what was intended, or if large parts of your life are barely remembered, take a risk and see a counselor who can explore these kinds of memories with you. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. And, it is just possible that you might get to know yourself in a whole new, and more whole way. Don’t think of counselling as just medicine for the psyche—think of it as exercise for the psyche.

I loved this movie. Not so much because I understood Alfonso Cuarón better at the end. But this movie challenged me to be honest with myself and to take responsibility for the memories that will shape my life unawares if I don’t pay attention.