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Memory

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Memory

When we recall an episode that took place in our past, we have a related but somehow new experience, in the present. We can remember some events that bring us pleasure, others that are perhaps a bit embarrassing, and still others that yet can sting, no matter how long ago these particular incidents took place. We are the same person who had those past experiences then, but the impact upon us when we recall them depends greatly upon the choices we make in the present.

Memories can arise gently when we are not thinking of anything in particular, and remembrances can come to us accompanied by strong feelings when a present incident triggers a quite specific and related occurrence from the past. Spontaneously remembering a recent dinner with a friend, or perhaps a recollection of a grade-school teacher, might elicit mild interest on our part. But if someone treats us with disdain, or if we are on the receiving end of criticism, we might have strong negative feelings, perhaps greater than would seem warranted by the present event, accompanied by the recollection of a truly painful incident from our past, even as far back as our childhood. What we choose to do now, will not alter the past, but can significantly change the power that the past event has upon our thoughts and feelings now.

We can reason with ourselves when a memory causes us distress; we can try to bring the perspectives of distance, experience, and insights we have gained, and apply our present understanding to our feelings – sometimes successfully, and at other times not. Another option, especially if “thinking it through” does not bring us satisfaction, is to revisit a particularly troubling event in company with God. That is, we choose not only to seek an understanding of a past event in order to achieve some healing, but we also consciously invite God to accompany us while we review the incident, just as we might bring a trusted friend with us when we are about to face a verbally abusive person. God was there, in every aspect of our past, and, with both full knowledge of us and total compassion for us, can help us now integrate both our understanding and our feelings relative to whatever past incident needs healing in the present.

Memories of all kinds can be cause for gratitude. We might joke about diminished capacity to remember names or the immediate past as we grow older, but our memories, great and small, are very important to us. We highly value our capacity to remember whether or not we turned the oven off before we left, or where we store our important documents, or how to perform many of the tasks we have learned over time. Our memories are not limited to sentimental recollections of special events – treasured as

some might be – but include every-day detailed memories that we take for granted. Our memories enable us to negotiate everything from putting on our shoes to engaging in some complex skills that we have developed over years of practice, such as driving a car, teaching a class, or running an organization.

“Thanks for the memories” can be much more than an old song, but serve as a suggestion for gratitude: Thank God for the gift of memory itself.