

“We remember”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*Leviticus 19:33-34 / Deuteronomy 10:14-22*

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

When Donald Trump announced his bid for presidency in June 2015, he gave voice to what has become common anti-immigrant, nativist rhetoric in the United States, saying, “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best... They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with [them]. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.”

What President Trump may or may not have realized was that this kind of language had been used before. In the late 19th century, Americans began saying the same thing about another group of immigrants. They said that their religion and culture were so foreign, so opposed to American values, that they could never become one of us. They were said to be brutish and violent, lazy and ignorant, unwilling to speak English, taking jobs that rightly belonged to real Americans. They were the worst of their country, criminals unwanted by their homeland, perhaps even terrorists. No, these weren’t Syrians or Mexicans. They were Italians.

It didn’t matter then, as it doesn’t now, that there was no truth to these prejudices. According to police records, Italian immigrants committed no more crimes than non-Italian citizens. A few Italians were indeed guilty of terrorism, part of a wave of anti-capitalist anarchism at the time. But they comprised a tiny portion of 4 million immigrants; many of the terrorists were actually US-born citizens, not Italians at all. Italians worked as hard as anyone else. Italians fought in World War I, comprising 12 percent of all the men who served in the US military, far outmatching their small proportion of the population.

Nonetheless, they faced discrimination and violence. And in 1891, they were the victims of one of the worst mass lynchings in US history, when 11 Italian men—acquitted by a court of law—were dragged into the street, shot and hanged, by a mob of 150 of New Orleans’ most respectable gentlemen: lawyers, teachers, doctors, and businessmen. No one was ever tried or convicted of the crime, which was praised as an act of justice by the media, including the *New York Times*. Among the mob were Irishmen, who like my own family had just, a generation or two earlier, faced similar violence and discrimination. Adam Serwer writes, “The story of American nativism is one in which the old immigrants, once objects of hatred, easily become the persecutors of the new.”

Did they forget, or did they simply no longer care once they were on the other side of the gun?

The extent of this voluntary amnesia is startling. Today the same people, once attacked as immigrants, now seek legislation that would not have allowed my ancestors and probably theirs into the country. Moreover, in the last year, the United States has reduced its accepted number of refugees by nearly half. The hostility goes beyond legislation, however—beyond words and

protests. According to the FBI, hate crimes against Muslims rose by 67 percent in the year 2015 alone.

Again, these attitudes have little basis in fact. Immigrants commit less crime than US-born citizens. The majority of terrorist acts on US soil in the last decade were committed not by Muslim immigrants but by alt-right extremists, who were white. Today, immigrants work hard jobs necessary to our economy. They serve in our military. They die for us, for our country. Many of the people targeted with racist rhetoric aren't even immigrants; they were born in this country.

These attitudes of fear and hate have prevailed against the Irish, the Italians, the Polish, the Germans, the Japanese, the Chinese, and many more, not to mention the forced migration of Africans through the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and the subsequent oppression of African Americans.

You'd think that this shared history of immigration and oppression would inspire compassion. But compassion requires memory, and memory is something we appear to be short on these days.

If you had to tell a stranger who you are, what would you tell them? You'd probably give your name and profession. You might tell them about your likes and dislikes. But for them to get to really know you, you'd have to share your memories—experiences, and people, and places from your past that have shaped who you are today. The same goes for our country. If you want to understand the United States, you have to understand its history. You have to know about the Revolutionary War, slavery and abolition, indigenous peoples and western expansion, the women's suffrage movement, Kennedy and the space race, and of course, September 11.

The same was true for the Israelites. You see, they were as prone to forgetfulness as us. As prone to sin and cruelty as anyone. And so God was ever reminding them of their past. They recited these reminders, which were later recorded in the Bible. They told themselves a story of who they were, and that story consisted of memories. One of those memories was the Exodus. The Israelites told this story over and over again. Perhaps more than any other moment in their history (excepting perhaps the covenant with Abraham), this was the moment that shaped their consciousness. It doesn't matter whether it exactly happened as they remembered; what matters is that it taught them their place in the world.

This story told them that they were once vulnerable, oppressed immigrants in a foreign land, in Egypt, and that God came to their rescue. God demanded their freedom. God led them, as refugees, through the wilderness, and made them a home. This memory became the basis for much of the Law. It told them to care for the vulnerable, because they were once vulnerable; to care for the immigrant, because they were once immigrants. This act of remembering became the center of their life together.

While receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel said, "The call of memory, the call *to* memory, reaches us from the very dawn of history. No commandment figures so frequently, so insistently, in the Bible. It is incumbent upon us to remember the good

we have received, and the evil we have suffered. New Year's Day, *Rosh Hashana*, is also called *Yom Hazikaron*, the day of memory. On that day, the day of universal judgment, man appeals to God to remember: our salvation depends on it. If God wishes to remember our suffering, all will be well; if He refuses, all will be lost. Thus, the rejection of memory becomes a divine curse, one that would doom us to repeat past disasters, past wars."

Judaism is a religion of memory. Remember what the Lord God did for you, says the Torah. Christianity also is a religion of memory. It is at the center of our experience of grace. We say it every time we take Communion. We recall Jesus' words: "Do this in remembrance of me." Remember, Jesus says; do not forget this sacrifice; do not forget this room, these people, this face, this bread and wine, this love.

To act in spite of such memory, to forget the gift, to forget the suffering, and to deny the gift to another, is not only to hurt that other; it is to do immense harm to our souls. To forget is to cut ourselves off, not only from our past, not only from our ancestors, but from God and grace itself. It is to make ourselves islands, ripped from the main, alone, without either past or future.

The good news is that, even now, God offers us memory. God speaks to us, from Exodus, from the Law, from the Communion table, from our neighbors, from history books, from immigrants and refugees. God calls to us, through ancient and covenantal memory, to remember our own heritage of being oppressed, of crying out for help, of being strangers in a foreign land.

We don't even have to go back that far in our memory. All we have to do is remember the times in our own lives when we've been vulnerable. All we have to do is remember who helped us, and who hurt us, or who simply looked the other way. Who do you want to be?

The reason we are able to love the immigrant as ourselves, and thus fulfill the greatest commandment, is because we are the immigrant. We are the hurting person huddled in the corner. We are the immigrant at the border. We are the child crying. We are the Hebrew people, freed by God, longing for home.

This memory is our moral compass. It inspires compassion beyond human capacity, for *we* are the recipients of compassion beyond human capacity. We are the inheritors of unearned salvation on the cross.

If forgetfulness is what tears us apart, then memory is what remakes the world. Memory is the safeguard of liberty, the assurance of love, the path back to God. It is what ties the body of Christ together, so that, in remembering, no part can say to another, "I have no need of you." It is what enables me to see myself in you.

Memory is, and must be, the foundation for all Christian attitudes toward immigration.

As Elie Wiesel said, "It is memory that will save humanity."

**Amen.**