

“Remember this”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Final Sunday – June 11, 2023

Deuteronomy 8:2-4, 6-16

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

They are perhaps two of the most powerful words: I remember. I remember you. I remember the times we have shared.

I picture the people standing in the desert, grandparents holding the hands of their grandchildren, as Moses looks upon the people he has walked with all these many years and says, “Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness.” Remember the lash of the whip when you were slaves. Remember how God brought you out of that land of slavery and fed you in the desert. Remember the mountain from which God taught you how to be a community.

Moses says they are going to need these memories. “For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land,” says Moses, “a land with flowing streams... a land of olive oil and honey, a land where... you shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God.” They had a chance to cross over into this land many years ago, but they were afraid. Now their memory tells them not to be afraid.

“Take care that you do not forget,” Moses says. Do not forget where you come from, and do not forget the lessons God has tried to teach you along the way. When life is good, do not forget those who are still walking that wilderness, who are still suffering beneath the lash of that whip. Use your memory of all that pain and all that grace to build a different kind of world, a better world, a more just and free and loving world.

That’s the irony of memory. Memory either can be a prison, stranding us in the past, blinding us to new possibilities, *or* it can be an open door to the future, by which we piece together the fleeting moments of the past so that we can understand and live more fully today.

It is a refrain that runs throughout Scripture. When God leads the people out of Egypt, Moses says remember this. When the people dwell in exile and God brings them home, the prophets say remember this. When Jesus breaks bread with his disciples on the night before his death, speaking of forgiveness and salvation, he says remember this.

Friends, I am going home. And I am taking this home with me. I carry it—you—with me because I remember.

I remember the meet-and-greets you did for Jenna and me the first summer we were here, and how one night we were going to Annette and Larry’s, and the GPS took us to the wrong side of the lake to an abandoned creepy barn, and we’re like, “This can’t be it,” and we’re lost and running out of gas, and they had to send Monta Faye and Dick to rescue us and lead us to the

house, and we were like an hour late, but no one cared; everyone had been having a great time just with each other.

I remember tea with Midge Drummond, and how I was told that she was the one member I had to visit, when I came here to candidate, to get her approval. She gave it.

I remember Scout Sunday and giving a tour to all the kids and telling them about all the programs, and the girl who said, “Wow! I had no idea church was so much fun!”

I remember Gary Rhodes singing from that choir loft and Bob Miller singing with his guitar on Easter Sunrise.

I remember singing to you “Won’t You Be My Neighbor,” as I donned the red cardigan and sneakers of Mr. Rogers. And I remember how hard it is to change your clothes and sing at the same time.

I remember walking into a full sanctuary for Ezra and Leo’s funeral. I remember George Hiza, this tower of a man, the Navy commander, shaking and crying, as he hugged me in the line afterward. I remember the rocking chairs you made for them, the meals you brought us, the flowers, and how at one point someone brought us a whole sheet cake and a whole apple pie. I ate that whole pie. And I remember the love you have given Emerson and Josephine.

I remember our first Pride service, the Syracuse Gay and Lesbian Chorus singing, Glyn interpreting in American Sign Language, Kim Patch giving out hugs, and how the next year, during the pandemic, we did it all at the drive-in movie theater.

I remember my second summer here, and about a dozen of us went to a transgender rights rally in Seneca Falls. I wore my clerical collar. I remember how the people were scared at first when they saw the religious folk coming. And I remember the tears they shed and the smiles they gave when they learned that we were there because God loved them too. I remember one mother of a transgender person saying that she had felt abandoned by God until that day when we showed up.

I remember the first time I cried for a member of this church who had died. I was in the parking lot of a church in Syracuse, at night, at the conclusion of a presbytery meeting, and I got the call that Jane Lumb had died. I remember what she told me days earlier when I asked her where God was for her right now; she said, “Oh, he’s right here beside me where he’s always been.”

I remember the demonstration for racial justice after the murder of George Floyd, and how we all took a knee together, and how our police were kneeling right there beside us. I remember when our Black Lives Matter banner got stolen and vandalized, and we received threats, but this church stayed strong, and hundreds of yard signs with the same message appeared all around Auburn.

I remember the three-day prison ministry retreat at Auburn Correctional, and how I shared with them my story of miscarriage and stillbirth, and how the next day an older man sat down beside

me and told me he had been thinking all night about my story, and he looked me in the eyes and said, “You know, these men here, they’d all kill to have had a dad like you. Maybe if they had, they wouldn’t be here. Maybe I wouldn’t be. I think God told me to tell you to consider adoption.”

I remember plates of steaming yummy food prepared at the Salvation Army Miracle Kitchen, and all the personal care items and bus passes and school supplies and rental assistance.

I remember the domestic violence victims we helped, and the old man who was living out in the country in squalor, and we helped pack up his stuff and move him to the Boyle Center.

I remember leading worship all alone from my study when the pandemic hit, and how weird it was at first talking to a little circle in a camera, but how intimate and worshipful it became.

I remember the prayer service outside the Commons during a COVID outbreak, with Jill and Paul standing in the snow and wind. Thousands of people watched that service and prayed with us that day.

I remember the first Christmas Eve service during the pandemic. We were in the sanctuary, but it was just the worship crew and myself; everybody else was online. The pews were empty. And I was feeling really down about it. It was my first Christmas Eve after my Mom had died. Toward the end of the service, I had my eyes closed as I listened to the choir sing, and when I opened them, I looked out at the sanctuary, and suddenly it wasn’t empty at all. It was full. All the saints of heaven were there, including my Mom.

I remember worship at the Permaculture Park, and animal blessings, and Wednesday Noon Studies, and Longest Night services, and MLK Celebrations, and the service of healing and reconciliation we hosted with Auburn First Church of God in Christ and the Harriet Tubman AME Zion Church.

I remember Holy Conversations and all the listening sessions.

I remember the Days of Service, planting flowers downtown, building houses for Habitat for Humanity, how we all pitched in to help build a playground.

I remember all the contemplative hikes, even the really tough one at Treman with Audrey and Kim. I remember our annual walk at Fort Hill Cemetery in memory of loved ones, as we spoke their names and placed roses on graves. I remember my own solitary daily walks there as I walked in prayer for you and conversed with God.

I remember dreaming up a new philosophy of youth ministry with Annette Bell.

I remember the first funeral I did here, and the last, and all them in between, and all the hours I spent sitting with you remembering their stories, and all the Kleenex we went through. I remember sitting with you in my study or your home. I remember every tear, every hug, every smile and laugh, every child, every baptism, every wedding, every Communion, every prayer.

I remember you.

I remember it all.

And I think these memories have something to teach us about how to live now.

I think they teach us to be grateful. I think they teach us that, despite how hard and lonely life can be, God is here. I think they teach us about love and how powerful it is, and about grace—how the best things in life are the unearned and unexpected acts of kindness. I think they show us that we can do this. They help us resist the urge to retreat to what is safe and comfortable. They draw us into life, into a bold future. They make us want to be a part of that again, and to share it with as many people as possible—and to share with them the name of the author of these memories: God.

And I just want to say, Thank you. Thank you for loving me, for showing me God, for giving me the chance to love you and to walk this difficult but beautiful journey with you.

I can't wait to see what new memories you create. Remember the love of God, and go! Live! God will do wondrous things through you, and for you. **Amen.**