

Sermon – In Remembrance
Sunday, September 10, 2023
Scripture - Exodus 12:1-14, Romans 13:8-14
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Our first reading is Exodus 12:1-3, 7-8, 11-14. Following Moses' encounter with Yahweh at the burning bush, he returns to Egypt to set his people free. Today's reading provides intimate details to the Passover meal which will protect them from the final plague God sent to Egypt before the crossing of the Red Sea. Through the years, this religious and liturgical Passover meal shared in homes commemorates God's liberation in Jewish history. Today we celebrate the sacrament of communion; a liturgical meal commemorating our liberation in Christ which has its roots in the Passover meal. In this worship experience we remember together and, in our remembrance, we are nurtured and renewed in God's grace. Hear now, the word of God.

12 The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: ² This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. ³ Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. ...⁷ They shall take some of the lamb's blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. ⁸ They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs.... ¹¹ This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the Passover of the LORD. ¹² For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD. ¹³ The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. ¹⁴ This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance. Amen.

Our second reading is Romans 13:8-14. Following teachings on the Christian's civil responsibilities to pay taxes and remain debt free, Paul reminds the believers that one debt from which they will never be free is the debt of love. Hear now God's Holy Word.

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹ The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet;" and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.¹¹ Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; ¹² the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; ¹³ let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴ Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. Amen.

The title of the meditation: In Remembrance

The Text: This day shall be a day of remembrance for you.... Exodus 12:14a

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, we thank you for the gift of memory and the meaning of memory in our lives and our faith. As we reflect on scripture, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Today we gather to recognize the gift of memory and the role it plays in sustaining and deepening our faith. It is a joy to gather on this Homecoming Sunday as we begin a new year of creating memories and remembering together. We want our children to remember the stories of their faith, yes, and we want them to taste and smell and feel God's love in their lives. Moreover, we want them to witness the love of Christ in our lives and we hope and pray that the memories created at Westminster will sustain and strengthen them throughout their faith journeys.

The time we spent with Paul in Philadelphia during his recent surgery, a visit from his childhood friends upon our return to Springfield, and Paul's participation in a childhood friend's wedding this weekend has unexpectedly stirred memories and feelings from his growing-up years. These memories have been a source of inspiration in preparing for the beginning of a new year at Westminster.

In thinking about the importance of memory, a book from Paul's middle school years came to my mind. The Giver by Lois Lowry received the 1994 Newbery Medal Award and is a story set in a future utopian society. It is about a community which desires to remove all pain and strife from life in order to create a "sameness." They do this by erasing memory. Inadvertently, the community also erases seasons, color, knowledge, music, love and any emotional depth or personal choice. Family units are only together until the children grow up and then they are forgotten. The community is run by a Council of Elders who assign each 12-year-old a job to be performed for a lifetime. The hero of the story, Jonas, is chosen to be the keeper of the memories from the time before the sameness and is mentored by "The Giver" who was the last receiver of memories. This parody of utopia exposes how essential freedom and memory are in nourishing the human spirit, which cannot know love and joy without also experiencing pain and strife.

The Giver is a poignant reminder of how vital memories are and how suffering is an integral part of our humanity. At the heart of our Judeo-Christian faith is the belief that we have a God who is willing to enter our suffering in Christ and whose Spirit is the keeper of our memories, shaping and giving meaning to the suffering that is a part of our lives and communities. Suffering is not contrary to sharing in God's glory, in fact the cross reminds us, the two are inseparable.

Oh, how we long to protect those we love from pain and suffering, especially our children, and yet, we know from our own experience that it is through losses and challenges, trials and hurdles, that we become people of faith, character and hope.

Henri Nouwen, in his book The Living Reminder talks about the importance of memory. *Our memory plays a central role in our sense of being. Our pains and joys, our feelings of grief and*

satisfaction, are not simply dependent on the events in our lives, but also, and even more so, on the ways we remember these events and the meanings we give them.

I have a sweet memory of serving communion in a fellowship much like our Bridges Mid-Week gathering during Paul's childhood. Older friends from the congregation were invited to join the children and asked to share a disappointment and loss in their lives...to reflect with the children on a time when a door closed and through this loss and sorrow, another door opened.

What followed was poignant. Men and women shared simple, yet powerful stories of the good that grew out of their disappointments... from the pain of not becoming a baton twirler that led to the kindness of a brother, from a devastating move in high school that strategically placed her across the street from the man she would marry; from the loss of an infant son which planted a seed to reach out to the children of the community.

The children listened attentively as we marveled at how God works mysteriously through the losses and disappointments of our lives to open doors and opportunities. As these friends shared their memories, and the meaning they had given them, we were each enriched, given courage and hope for our own unpredictable journeys.

Today, we partake of the sacrament that remembers and gives meaning to Christ's life and death; a sacrament which shapes our understanding of ourselves and our God.

As we gather at this table *In Remembrance of Christ*, we give thanks for the gift of memory which nourishes our faith, strengthens us in times of sorrow, and inspires us to live joyful lives, serving God and one another. Amen.