

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: May 24, 2015
Sermon Title: Remembering
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Proverbs 10 (various)

I have a proposal. We really need to replace the sanctuary. It's old, impractical. It does not meet our needs, the sight lines are poor, the narthex is practically useless. The altar area is tiny, the choir loft is squished, this pulpit is worse. It's impossible to change the light bulbs in the chandeliers, the bathrooms are ridiculous. It's just not a modern church.

We need to tear it down, build out a little in the front, go farther back, a little more to the side, increase our seating, improve our seating, maybe have a three-sided balcony.

That way, we don't have to have five services on Christmas Eve, a tent on Easter, turn people away on Confirmation Sunday. We'd have more ability to program, be creative, be flexible.

The news reports have been full of proof of the decline of Christianity in America, and we need to position ourselves to compete in the modern world. And to do that, we need to take this 18th-century church in this 19th-century building and grab hold of the 21st century.

Now that I have your attention, of course that's not going to happen! I'm not going to propose it. You're not going to approve it for one main reason: Memories. Remembrance. Nostalgia. Our beloved little sanctuary is over 150 years old. It's been our home for more than half of our 300-year church history. Just in our years as your pastors, Alida and I have done 400 weddings, 700 funerals; more than 500 kids have been baptized here.

This church is still here as a beacon of hope, an oasis of peace, a true sanctuary in times of trouble. On September 11th, hundreds of people sought strength right here, hour after hour, day after day. People come here privately, anonymously, when life crises come their way. Which is a good remembrance. When sickness, divorce, unemployment, heartache, distress of every kind strike, people come here, to this building, these pews, our sanctuary.

It's the focal point of our Dogwood Festival; it's been the prized location for high school plays, a cappella concerts, July 4th celebrations. Our beloved Hume Cronyn did a poetry reading here. Alex Beyer has done piano recitals. Niles, the cello. We have a Town Hall meeting here this afternoon.

Year after year, this tiny Greenfield Hill Congregational Church building has touched our hearts and left memories, which is a good remembrance, a good reminder on Memorial Day weekend. This "holiday" is about memories. Nowadays it's an amalgam of remembrance, barbecues, get your boat in the water, travel somewhere; the unofficial start of summer, sports, beer, beach, parades, and patriotism.

When I was growing up, it was called "Decoration Day," and it really was a "memorial day." People all over America made a pilgrimage to family graves, cleaned them up after winter debris, spruced and planted, decorated the graves, often with flags, with special attention to soldiers' graves. And we remembered. At the graves, we remembered our loved ones. "Aunt Nellie is over there, and Uncle Joe, and remember little Carol, who died so young, and here's Grandma and Grandpa and," with a hitch in the voice, "here's Mom."

It was very much a Thornton Wilder "Our Town" kind of cemetery experience. Alida and I saw "Our Town" a couple of summers ago up in Williamstown. The third act takes place in the town cemetery, as all those buried loved ones, all those treasured memories start talking to one another, start remembering, sharing . . . what else, memories! When the play ended, Alida and I sat in our seats, weeping. We couldn't move, we didn't move until they had to close up the theater! Why? Because as pastors, our lives are filled with your memories. We live our lives along with you. Your ups are our ups; your downs are our downs. St. Paul was 100 percent right. "We weep with those who weep, we rejoice with those who rejoice." And we wouldn't have it any other way.

It's even true structurally: we work in this building full of memories. Across the way we have our "Memorial Room" and behind the Len Morgan Youth Barn, a memory in itself, is our "Memorial Garden." Ministry is memory. We are either remembering or we are making memories.

In my book of poetry, *Fieldstones of Faith*, I include a poem called "Holy Communion: the Remembrance." It's built on three premises: first, Jesus asks us to remember. Second, I read a wonderful book, *The Madonnas of Leningrad* by Debra Dean, about the effort to save the great artworks during the siege of Leningrad in World War II. In the story there is a lot of sorrow

as the artwork is removed and losses contemplated. An old Russian peasant lady advises the younger woman to build a "memory palace" in her mind, to imagine each room filled with everything you never want to forget, and then visit it regularly to keep the memories alive. That idea led to the third premise of the poem, that our religious lives and our faith are filled with memories: childhood and adult spiritual moments that left an impression. And we can take all those spiritual moments and create a "memory palace" to keep our faith lessons alive. My poem begins with an introduction, and then Jesus speaks to us. Here it is:

Holy Communion: The Remembrance
(Luke 22:19)

Lifting the Chalice
Jesus invites us
to build a Memory Palace
filled room by room
with golden treasure
and great adventure
ancient stories
of grandeur and wonder
taught by some sainted
Church School teacher
on flannelgraph or DVD
this museum of memories
from the Red Sea to Galilee
built

*to remember me
why I lived
and how
and why I died
and how
I never stopped
loving
you
and so, live once more
through you.*

*Remember the memories
I've hidden
there's one in the kitchen
another on the wall
reflected on a chalice
in the Memory Palace Hall*

*find one in the drawer
smile a tear at the bed
don't forget the basement
don't forget the shed.*

*Travel through your heart's delight
walk through my Dark Soul's night
see what's in the Upper Room
what's not in the borrowed tomb
look for a Christmas crèche
and yes
a wooden cross
a Madonna
an angel or two
and an Easter basket.
empty!
remember?
of course you do.*

I had a lot of fun choosing our Scriptures today. There are several types of "remembrance" verses in the Bible. There are things we are told to memorialize, to remember, like Passover, or Jesus saying specifically at the Last Supper, "Do this in remembrance of me!" Then there are places that get memorialized. Some holy event takes place, and somebody decides to pile up stones there, or erect an altar as a way to remember.

There's actually a fascinating example of that in Jesus's life. It's called "The Transfiguration." Jesus takes three of his disciples up on a mountain where they have a profoundly mystical, spiritual experience: Jesus is "transfigured" by a bright light, and suddenly, Moses and Elijah are standing there with him.

Imagine if right now, a halo appeared around my head, and Abraham Lincoln and Jesus showed up and told you, "Listen to David; this is a really good sermon!" You would be impressed! Well, Jesus's disciples were impressed, and the number-one thing they wanted to do was . . . can you guess? Build a memorial! They wanted to erect some kind of monument, add a bronze plaque, hire a tour guide, sell mementos, make it a holy relic, a place of pilgrimage and tourism. Jesus nixed that idea and said, in effect, "Wait till I'm dead. Then you will have something to remember."

I don't think Jesus is opposed to monuments, but he definitely prefers memories, especially an active memory that keeps alive the true meaning of an event or person. We do tend to concretize things, to build things, and

sometimes that helps, but sometimes the real meaning gets lost in the concrete.

If you ever go to Prague, there is a beautiful historic main bridge, called the Charles Bridge. On either side are 10 or 12 gigantic exquisite statues of saints and holy figures. In the middle of the bridge there is one statue in particular and one plaque in particular that people rub for good luck, so much so that they are shiny bright, rubbed clean every day by bustling tourists and honeymoon couples, all engaging in a tradition about . . . about what? Nobody knows! There is just a bronze statue of a saint that everybody rubs but nobody knows anything about the saint or the tradition or the faith. They just know everybody does it because everybody in front of them does it.

The monuments, the memorials have lost their meaning; the bronze, the sculptures, the artists' touch have lost their meaning. Now it's art, not a memorial. Truth is, nowadays, almost any memorial you can mention is only a background for a selfie. A background. For a selfie. Which leaves us with the other kind of memorial, here in our hearts and here in our minds, where we remember, with feeling. Which is why I came up with all those verses from the Book of Proverbs, Chapter 10.

*The memory of the righteous will be a blessing;
The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life;
The wages of the righteous bring them life;
The tongue of the righteous is choice silver;
The lips of the righteous nourish many;
The prospect of the righteous is joy;
The mouth of the righteous brings forth wisdom;
The lips of the righteous know what is fitting;
The memory of the righteous will be a blessing.*

These are great verses, aren't they? And true! "*The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, the tongue of the righteous is choice silver, the lips of the righteous know what is fitting,*" but, of course, the one for today is what we opened and closed with: "*The memory of the righteous will be a blessing.*" "*The memory of the righteous will be a blessing.*" And that goes both ways. "The memory of the righteous" can refer *both* to the one remembering *and* the one being remembered. Both are a blessing. The righteous person has blessed memories, *and* the righteous person is remembered blessedly.

Our challenge is to be both or do both. We should live our lives in such a way that when people remember us, it will be a blessing, an uplift, even a spiritual moment. Yes, live your life worthy to be remembered.

We always mock our presidents in their second terms for trying to leave behind a "legacy," some signature achievement . . . by which to be remembered. I don't mock that. We have 330 million Americans. I wish every one of us were trying to leave behind a legacy by which to be remembered. Something that would be a blessing when remembered.

The other side of remembrance is that our remembering, our Memorial Days, need to be done in such a way that the remembering is a blessing. I hate to be negative on such a beautiful day, but I think America has done a poor job of that. We've turned "holy days" into "holidays," and our holidays have been turned into shopping sprees, marketing extravaganzas, and horrific traffic jams on highways. Most holidays are an excuse for a long weekend. I actually saw a clothing store yesterday with this sign:

Memorial Day Sale
Buy Here
The Home of the Brave

Questionable.

On June 20, under Jerry Hood's leadership, our church will once again build our "Field of Flags." We first did this maybe eight years ago. Our war against terrorism had been waged for several years. Our nation's losses were mounting; our sorrows and fears ran deep. My original plan, I'm embarrassed to say, was just to have people come out of church one Sunday after the benediction, grab a flag and stick it in the grass on the front lawn of the church. A bit haphazard or, as a friend said, "ugly." I was overruled, thankfully. Brenda Steele took it over, and with a terrific team of volunteers created our first Field of Flags. That first one was the most emotional. We all knew intellectually that 4,000 or 5,000 killed in the wars was a lot, but when you see that many flags planted in the grass, you begin to see and feel the enormity of the loss.

No one will ever forget that first Field of Flags. Wait, let me put that more positively. We will always remember that first Field of Flags, which, after all, is the idea.

If the first was the most emotional, the last one was the most important. By 2013, America was a war-weary nation. We didn't want to hear about it anymore. We had lost almost \$2 trillion from our economy, leaving us a weakened nation. And the toll in soldiers' souls was over 6,000. It was that weariness, that, I hate to say it, forgetfulness that led me to ask for our third Field of Flags.

Beaches are nice on July 4th. Vacations are nice in the summer. It's fun to forget. But memories, the Bible says, are supposed to be a blessing. And so, one Saturday morning two years ago, over 80 people, young and old, Boy Scouts and veterans, gathered once again to plant 6,600 flags, and once again, the remembering was a blessing.

Ask anyone who planted even one flag. Ask anyone who's stopped early in the morning or late at night or in the heat of the day to walk among the flags. Ask anyone who read the names. *Yes, we have each and every name printed out.* Ask them, ask the moms and dads of soldiers serving overseas. Ask the World War II veterans, the Fairfield firemen, the little kids who came by and saluted.

We thought that would be the last one. On the final day, we even invited people to take a flag home. Instead, our world, weary of war, is more at war today. With the rise of ISIS, with the resurgence of Al Qaeda, with the ugly fact of homegrown terrorists, something is brewing. And whatever it is that is brewing will grow our Field of Flags. We need to remember that. *They* are the "Home of the Brave," not a clothing store.

The bad guys are coming after us, or we're going after them. The cost of doing nothing will be heavy; the cost of doing something will be heavy. And those who pay the cost are worthy to be remembered. Our Field of Flags is for them, the past and the future.

Theirs is the blessing we are blessed by, our freedoms, our memories, our yearnings, even for peace, are blessed by them, by each and every flag, by each and every name.

One more time, with more names added and more flags planted, we choose to remember.

We must make sure it is a blessing.