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Sermon Title: "Your America"
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Deuteronomy 4:9

Deuteronomy 4:9

But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children—

Memorial Day is a combination of patriotism and family memories. In my growing up days, it was still called "Decoration Day," a time when everyone went to the cemetery, tidied up the graves after a long winter, planted flowers, and remembered. Family memories. But it was also a time of parades: patriotic parades that in my day featured local heroes of long-ago wars. In those days we still had World War I veterans and some from the Spanish-American War. Our Queens parade always ended at Buddy Monument, except we thought it was "Bloody Monument," being a war memorial and all; and ending with a 21-gun salute, we kids rushing forward to get the spent cartridges.

As an adult, I learned that it really is "Buddy Monument," like many war memorials, a tribute to the special camaraderie that happens in war. So, on Memorial Day, families were remembering grandparents and loved ones of days gone by, and towns were remembering heroism and sacrifice of days gone by. Depending on circumstances, one might take precedence over the other from year to year, family or patriotism, but both were for remembering. Both make it Memorial Day. The Bible would applaud that because the Bible is constantly telling us, "Don't forget . . . remember; don't forget . . . remember."

Two of the biggest Jewish/Christian festivals are really "Memorial Day" dinners: Passover and Holy Communion. Passover came about because God told the Jews every year, "Remember the horror of your slavery, remember how you got out . . . how I got you out." And if you've ever had Passover with your Jewish family and friends, you know it's all about remembering: every bite of food you eat, every sip of a drink, every prayer or Scripture read, the table setting itself, the

stories told, all done to remember, to memorialize God's salvation of Israel. At the Last Supper, Jesus is doing just that, remembering Passover, when he added a new layer of meaning, using the Passover bread and the Passover wine to symbolize his sacrificial love for us. And what is the only rule, Jesus's only rule for getting Communion? "Do this in remembrance of me." That's it. Remember.

I never say this word right: "mnemonic," as in "mnemonic device." Something to help you remember. Well, the whole Bible, our whole worship, our Church life is a mnemonic device designed to help us to memorialize God's interaction with humanity. Everything we do is to remind us, simply, directly, "Hey, God is alive. So are we. Let's get working."

I've had a fascinating month, thanks to you. A month ago we brought out my latest writing, that essay called "My America." The first half is a memoir, which is the French word for memory. Remembrance. And I have a personal pronoun at the front: "My America. My memories. Of my growing up in post-World War II Queens, New York, a time of exuberance and optimism, a "can-do" spirit that dramatically changed America. Opportunities. Freedoms. Rights were thought about, talked about, brought about. I grew up in it, I lived through it, I took part in it, I benefitted from it.

That is my story, and I'm sticking to it! My story. My remembrance. "My America." Now it's your turn. Among my hopes for this writing project is to have Americans thinking about their America, your America, on the way to becoming *our* America. To do that we do have to know one another better. There's a lot of talk about "getting out of our bubble," a simple recognition that everybody, everybody lives within certain confines. We all have a bubble. As a result, we think differently about things, in large part because we see things differently; or maybe we see things differently in large part because we think differently.

Last week I read an article by Julie Suratt in *The Boston Globe* about a powerful quote from the great German writer, Goethe. In the early 1800s he said, "Each sees what is present in their heart." Whether it's in our heart or in our mind or in our soul, it does affect how we see things, even America. Some of these differences are fun, and some are profound, and some are simple.

In our family, baseball is king. We've all played it, coached it, obsessed over it, sacrificed for it for generations. One year, when I was Pastor at a Baptist Church in Massachusetts, I was coaching a Babe Ruth League team, and because of a rainout, they scheduled a Sunday morning game. I told my Deacons to start the Church service without me. I told my team we needed to beat the other team so bad, "the slaughter rule" would be called and the game shortened. And they did! And I got to Church in time to preach. Yes, baseball is king in my America, my corner of my America.

So imagine my surprise when I lived in rural Georgia, very rural Georgia, farm country: peanuts, cotton, and so forth. My son played baseball at our high school, a very good team, but they needed one more pitcher. And the best pitcher in the county lived on his daddy's farm, worked on his daddy's farm. There was no time for baseball.

I was sent to convince the farmer to let his son pitch. I couldn't imagine such a thing, couldn't comprehend how farming could be more important than baseball. How spring planting or summer harvesting, tractor repair, or even family income could be more important than baseball. Now, that's a lighthearted illustration, but it is still an illustration. This is "our America," but there are many different experiences of it.

Do an experiment. Talk within your own family, your children, grandchildren—all the same in so many ways, a lot of the same DNA, same socio-economic factors, a lot of similarities. Talk to them about most anything. And then see how different your America is from their America. If you want to expand the experiment, just think about regional differences—ethnic, cultural, gender, economic, generational differences. And the truth is all those differences create different memories. I'm not saying my memories are better than yours, or that mine are true and everyone else's less true. I'm saying they're mine, and that's where I begin. And you have yours, and that's where you begin, we begin. With our memories.

I went to see the new movie, "Avengers." It's the fastest-earning, biggest moneymaking film in the history of movies, \$2.5 billion in the first month! I didn't get it. Not at all! I walked out after an hour, didn't even finish my popcorn. My grandchildren in India loved it. My kids in America loved it. Alida loved it. Rotten Tomatoes and the critics and millions of theatergoers loved it. Me? Meh!

Now, in the popular language of today, with our Internet anonymity and general incivility and no filter at all, I could call those who loved it clueless, cultural Neanderthals, empty-headed, silly. And they could call me elitist, an idiot, an old fogey, out of touch, just plain stupid. Or I could simply say, "That's not my cup of tea, not my thing, but I'm glad you liked it." Or as Alida often says, "O.K., you can pick the next one."

The issue is, in any such debate about any such topic, are we trying to win, to defeat the other view, to drown it out? Or are we trying to get somewhere together? Bring it back to this holiday. Is Memorial Day only about remembering loved ones or only about patriotism? Can we do one while honoring those doing the other? Can we even do both? The challenge is what do we do with our memories? Some of us idealize them, memorize them, idolize them, dwell on them.

When I lived in rural Georgia, it was in Sumter County. We were all known by our county, and one friend said to me, "The thing about Sumter County is every male is forever 16." That takes memory too far. Memory is for building on. Not for living in.

I often tell stories of my family life, mostly putting us in a good light, or at least a humorous light. This was different. The Rowe family settled in rural Maine in 1805, dug a well, built a shack, farmed more or less meagerly for 150 years. My father took it over in the 1960s, and by then it was a place of memories. No electricity. No running water. No bathrooms. But memories aplenty. We would gather around the old wood stove—itself a memory—and tell stories of yesteryear. We never fixed it. Or improved it. Eventually we allowed the volunteer fire department to burn the house down for training. The land got sold. In other words, for us, we never took it beyond a memory. We had fun with it, but the past never made it into our future.

The Bible offers a different purpose for memory. In the Bible, the past is always meant to drive us into the future. Memory is always meant for instruction, so I found a wonderful verse in Deuteronomy 4:9. Deuteronomy is one of those old books in the Bible that is always using the past to guide the future. It's telling a very young Israel, a very new nation, how to make it into tomorrow. "Be careful," the Bible says, "be careful." And watch yourselves closely so you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart. Teach them to your children and your children's children." Teach your memories; teach what you've learned on down the line.

My little essay and your response to it give us something special to build on. Lessons learned. Loves shared. Tragedies, defeats, losses, failures overcome. Delights, joys, triumphs treasured. All instructive.

Being a sports nut, I'm especially intrigued by athletes who overcome failure. A slump. A bad patch of bad play. Pitchers getting hit hard. Batters not hitting at all. Golfers shanking. Tennis serves going wide. Scorers not scoring. It happens. Thanks to modern technology, an athlete's performance is on video, good, bad or ugly, for everyone to see. What interests me is how players and coaches are using all that video, which is in keeping with today's theme, "a memory," right? You hit a bases-loaded triple your junior year in high school to win a big game, and your mom captures it on her iPhone, or your school tapes it. That's a memory, right? If your mom posts it on Facebook, it will pop up every year on the anniversary!

So today's smart players, when they slump, they go to the videotape, and interestingly, they look for the good *and* the bad. Here's a video of you striking out with the bases loaded. See? You took your eye off the ball. Your stride was

too long. Your hands were too low. And here's you hitting the golf ball. That tennis serve was just right. Look at yourself. Everything is square. In balance. Focused.

The power of memory to teach. That's what Deuteronomy was saying, that's why Jesus's Last Supper tells us to "remember," that's why Jews still, after 3,000 years, eat their Passover meal. To remember. The good and the bad. What was. What should be.

Wednesday night I was captivated by a PBS special on the Korean War, especially the Battle of the Chosin Reservoir. The entire program was perfect for Memorial Day because it was nonstop memories, archival footage, and interviews with U.S. soldiers who survived. If hell can be cold, that was it. Freezing cold. Snow up to your knees. Enemy Chinese soldiers coming in waves, unrelenting waves. Each hour produced stories of courage, sacrifice, endurance, love. And failure. Headquarters didn't know what was going on. Headquarters didn't want to know what was going on. And when Headquarters was told what was going on, they didn't believe it. War is that: heroism and hell side by side. Life is that: joy and sorrow, anger and love, healing and hurt, doubt and faith, good and evil, Crucifixion and Resurrection. They all teach us, if we choose to remember.

And so, on Memorial Day, we go to our graves, we remember our loved ones—from the freshest to those long ago. The loss is real. The tears are real. The death is real. And our faith is real.

And so, on Memorial Day, we go to the Town Parade, we cheer the flags, we honor the soldiers, we remember the wars, the freshest, now, ongoing, to those long ago. The loss is real. The tears are real. The deaths are real. And our faith is real.

In memory of all those whom we loved and all those who served, let's stand and sing our final hymn, The Navy Hymn, No. 85, "Eternal Father, Strong to Save":

*Eternal Father, strong to save,
whose arm has bound the restless wave,
who bid the mighty ocean deep
its own appointed limits keep:
O hear us when we cry to thee
for those in peril on the sea.*

*O Savior, whose almighty word
the winds and waves submissive heard,
who walked upon the foaming deep,*

*and calm amid its rage didst sleep:
O hear us when we cry to thee
for those in peril on the sea.*

*O Holy Spirit, who did brood
upon the chaos wild and rude,
and bid its angry tumult cease,
and gave, for fierce confusion, peace:
O hear us when we cry to thee
for those in peril on the sea.*

*O Trinity of love and power,
all travelers guard in danger's hour;
from rock and tempest, fire and foe,
protect them whereso'er they go:
thus evermore shall rise to thee
glad praise from air and land and sea. You*