

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: May 30, 2021  
Sermon: "The Upside and Downside of Memories"  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scripture: Scripture Litany

## Scripture Litany for Memorial Day:

Leader: Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of me."  
(1 Corinthians 11:24)

People: Remember me when you come into your Kingdom.  
(Luke 23:42)

Leader: Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you.

People: Therefore, keep the commandments of the Lord your God.

Leader: For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters;

People: a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey where you will lack nothing. You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land that he has given you.

Leader: Do not forget the Lord your God, when you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord our God. (Deuteronomy 8:1-14)

People: For I will forgive their wickedness, and will remember their sins no more."  
(Hebrews 8:12)

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Memorial Day is a strange hybrid holiday. July 4th is clearer: it's patriotic. Veterans Day is about the soldiers. Memorial day? It's a mix. Even the origins are

a mix. Did it start with a group of Black slaves providing a dignified burial for Union soldiers? Or with Confederate widows and mothers wanting to honor their war dead? Or with the North remembering its Civil War sacrifices?

By the time I was growing up, Memorial Day weekend had several purposes: No. 1. Hometown parades. Our Boy Scout Troop was also a Drum, Bugle, and Fife Corps, and we'd march in three or four parades every Memorial Day weekend. Like everyone, we'd gawk with hero worship at the World War I and Spanish-American War veterans, each looking like Gary Cooper in "Sergeant York." And we'd scramble for the spent cartridge shells after the rifle gun salute. That was memory #1 of Memorial Day.

No. 2: Baseball doubleheaders, from kids' leagues to the Major Leagues.

No. 3: Spring cleanup of family graves, all the clutter and debris left over from long winters and rainy springs, swirling about, clinging to gravestones. People brought rakes and flowers and flags. And tears.

No. 4: The first big step into summer. First barbecue since last Labor Day. Get the boat in the water. Open up your cottage. Or dream of having a boat!

So flags are waving, soldiers are marching, bands are playing, the dead are honored, the living are relaxing. And all along the way, memories. Remembering.

I'm going to take an unusual twist with today's sermon: the upside and the downside of memories. Memories are precious, beautiful, fun, inspiring, motivational. At almost every funeral, I tell loved ones the memories are their best inheritance. But "reality check": Not all memories are precious, beautiful, fun, inspiring, motivational. Some are haunting. Jarring. Hurtful.

There's an old saying among soldiers, especially those of World War II and before, that anyone who talked about a battle wasn't there. Those old soldiers didn't look to conjure up battlefield memories; their nighttime dreams were more than enough. I remember talking with a 90-year-old gentleman, planning his funeral, and he started talking about his war in the Pacific. "This is the first time I've talked about it," he said. Ninety years old, 70 years after. Some memories are hard. Unwelcome.

The "upside" is easy. In our litany today we used three classic "remember" verses. At Jesus's Last Supper, when he gave the Disciples the bread of his body and the wine of his blood, the only instruction he gave was, "Do this in remembrance of me."

At our weekly Bible study the last few weeks, we've seen Jesus's emphasis on staying connected. His human life was coming to an end, his earthly ministry was almost finished, his friends were worried and sad and afraid. So one way or another, he showed them how to stay connected. Love is one way. "Love one another," he said at that same Last Supper. "Do as I say."

Service is another way. After Jesus washed his Disciples' feet, he told them, "I've set you an example. Do the same thing." And then at the Lord's Supper, Jesus was point-blank: "Remember me." Put it all together, he's saying, "Love like me," "Serve like me." "Then you'll remember me." That's an eternal and profound connection.

Only a few hours later, on the cross, the thief being crucified with Jesus asked, "Remember me when you come into your paradise." The thief is in the process of being killed; he's paying for his crimes. He's in agony and in fear, and his final thought is for Jesus to remember him. It's a fascinating conversation. Both of them are convicted criminals. Both are being executed. It's as bad as it gets. Yet that so-called "good thief" believes the best about Jesus, that Jesus is headed toward heaven, paradise, his honest-to-goodness "just reward."

And so he asks Jesus to believe the best about him. "Remember me," he asks. "Remember my good side, remember my kindness, remember when I was a good son, a nice brother, a kind neighbor, a friendly stranger. Remember something about me worth remembering, not just that I was a thief." Jesus did him one better: "I'll carry your memory with me and you along with it. This day thou shalt be with me in Paradise."

Memories can do that. Memories can take us places we want to go, we need to go. Memories keep alive more than just the memories.

Then we had that other section of "memory" Scripture, the great verses from Deuteronomy: "Remember," God says to Israel. "Don't forget . . . don't forget who you are, where you came from, how you got here, and who's been with you every step of the way." "Stop thinking you're a 'one-man show,'" God is saying.

Whenever I'm in Bratislava, I see a street musician who plays about a dozen instruments at once, all while pedaling his bicycle that powers several of the instruments. He is a "one-man show." And you know what? The music is awful. Let that be a lesson to us. We all need more than ourselves.

"We're a team," God is saying. "Whatever we accomplish, we accomplish together, whatever we have to go through, we'll go through together." And along the way, remember the positives. Specifically, God was reminding the Israelites about how great a place their country was—its land, its possibilities, its

abundance, its nurture and nature. "A land flowing with milk and honey," as the saying goes. A good lesson for us.

So many Americans seem to be in a bad mood about something . . . or someone. Some politician we don't like. Some policy. Some movement. But you know what? Those "purple mountain majesties . . ." "fruited plains . . ." "Amber waves of grain . . ." "Beautiful for spacious skies," they are still ripe and ready . . . to make *new* memories.

Yet memories can be troublesome. And that's the other half of this sermon and perhaps more than half of the Gospels. How *not* to remember. How to let go of bad memories. What memory of some person or some thing is holding you back?

I happen to be very good at clinging to bad memories. Those of you who've been around the Church for a long time know that I wrote a book about my years as president of Habitat for Humanity International; indeed, the good, the bad, and the ugly. Including injustices against me. In the book I state bluntly that I wasted 20 years of my life clinging to my bad memories, holding on to bitterness and resentment. To no good purpose.

I can tell you from such personal experience *and* 50 years of pastoral experience, there's no benefit to hanging on to bad memories. I've never heard a person say, "I hate my ex-spouse, so I badmouth, gossip about, get back at him or her. And it's been such a blessing! It's strengthened my bond with my kids; it's built up my business and helped my social standing in the community."

No, no, no. Of course not! Living off of bad memories accomplishes nothing. Find wholeness. Find healing. Find new memories.

Because of my many years with Habitat for Humanity, I worked closely with Jimmy Carter, and that kept me attuned to the wider Carter family. President Carter's sister, Ruth Carter Stapleton, was a Christian evangelist of a certain type. Nowadays she might be called a "self-help guru." Her particular gift was the "healing of memories." She would meet with people carrying around their "baggage," as some people call their burdens, their anger, resentments—bitter, bitter memories. She would have them recall that memory, lay it out in lavender, in all its self-righteous "woe is me" detail.

Remember. See it in your mind's eye. Feel it in your gut. Then . . . invite Jesus into that memory, right there in the room, along side you. Seeing and feeling what you remember. And then, let Jesus rewrite your script, wipe clean that bad memory, create a new ending. Change the course of your life.

I'm not Pollyanna. I don't know if there's a "statute of limitations" on bad memories. I can only repeat from personal experience: 20 years was too long and too stupid. My bad memory was worth a good six-month sulk at best. No more.

Now, I recognize we have two kinds of bad memories. Individual—something bad that is done to you or me. It's personal. And collective—something bad is done to our group, our people, our kind.

September 11th is a collective memory. The Holocaust is a collective memory. Slavery. Injustices done to your collective identity.

When I lived in the Boston area, I had many Irish friends, for whom the Irish Potato Famine and English culpability was only yesterday. A lot of Armenian friends for whom the Turkish genocide of Armenians was as fresh as this morning.

Collective memories are strong. But listen to this interesting verse: Hebrews 8:12, where God talks about a new day, a new age, a new world, where God "will remember their sins no more." God is promising to *not* remember. Sins are a personal affront to God. Sins are a direct slap at God, a repudiation of everything God stands for. Yet God promises not only to forgive but also to *not remember*. Over. Done with.

God plans to rewrite the script. To wipe clean that bad memory, to create a new ending, to change the course of your life. No bad judgment hanging over our heads. No bad memory. On a personal level, no stern encounter with God where He shakes that Michelangelo-Sistine-Chapel-sized finger of judgment at you. And say, "Oh, you! I remember what you said that day . . . I remember what you did one afternoon . . . I remember when . . ." On a collective level, no stern encounter with God looking at you and saying, "Oh, you're one of those . . . you're one of them."

My point is obvious: if God can choose not to hang on to bad memories, then why not give it a try ourselves?

I think Jimmy Carter's sister was on to something. Invite Jesus into your worst memory, invite Jesus into your harshest, most disappointing, and most upsetting memory that lingers. Redo it, with a Jesus ending. Create a new memory.

I had a friend, a child of hard-working immigrant parents. They had one of those "Mom-and-Pop" delis that were all over any American city back in the day. Open 6 AM to 9 PM seven days a week, the whole family pitching in.

The years went by, and my friend grew up and became successful. One day, he was on the phone with his father who wasn't feeling well, so the son berated him

for working all the time, not taking a vacation, forcing the whole family to help out. "You're a workaholic, it's going to kill you." Then he hung up. That night his dad died.

I met this fellow 15 years later, still haunted, still broken, still guilt-ridden by that memory. Frozen in time. Unable to give or accept love.

Together, we stumbled into the Jimmy Carter's sister, Ruth Carter Stapleton, thing, but we didn't know it at the time. All we knew was based on simple faith. We knew God loved us. We knew Jesus died on the cross for us. We knew God was greater than the worst in us. We knew God didn't want us imprisoned in guilt forever.

So we trusted God to rewrite the script, to literally redo my friend's final phone call with his dad. He told his dad he loved him. He told his dad how his own success, the son's success, was the result of all the lessons he learned growing up working in the deli.

He told his dad he made the best grinders in Massachusetts. He told his dad he was proud of him, and his dad said, "I love you," something he had never said before.

"See you later, alligator," the son said. "In a while, crocodile," the dad responded, an old good memory from another time. And my friend cried and smiled, two things he hadn't been able to do in a long while. He lost one memory worth losing. He found a memory worth keeping.

May this be true for our Memorial Day.

Our final hymn today is "Eternal Father, Strong to Save," also known as "The Navy Hymn," No. 85 in your hymnal,

*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.*