

“When we don’t remember we forget”
Sermon on Sunday, November 23, 2025

Dear church,

I don’t know how much you know about your family’s history. Perhaps you can tell stories that have been passed on from generation to generation. Or you maintain some beloved traditions you grew up with, especially now as the holidays approach. And when you do so, I bet it gives you a feeling of comfort and belonging, a sense of where you come from. Some of us have grown up with powerful family traditions; others, not so much. It’s not necessary of course to have those traditions in order to become a solid and healthy human being, but they can be helpful.

I mention that for a number of reasons. One, we will remember people today who have gone from us this past year, gone “home to the Lord” as we say, including my mother-in-law who lived and enforced family traditions, giving her children and grandchildren a solid foundation, a sense of belonging, a gravity center. I also mention it because we are celebrating the ministry and history of our Thrift Shop today and that’s part of where our church comes from and who we are as a congregation. The tradition of noticing people in need and helping in tangible ways is alive in our community, 33 years later, and not only in our Thrift Shop.

Finally, I want to emphasize the importance of remembering where we come from because the Jewish people have given us a wonderful example. They have ritualized remembering more than any other group I know. You notice that in the first reading from Deuteronomy. “My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous.” One of my favorite Old Testament scholars, long gone, suggested this sentence may have been the first creed of Israel, something they passed on from generation to generation. If that was so, it was a sobering remembrance, recalling their humble beginnings. That kind of remembrance is also important lest we forget that we stand on the shoulders of people who have paved opportunities for us. There are numerous passages in the Old Testament that remind the people of Israel where they came from. It’s a constant refrain. In some Bible translations, the word “remember” appears 1,200 times, many of those related to Israel’s beginnings. “We once were slaves in Egypt and by the grace of God we were led to a brighter future.” Something along those lines... And that is followed by rituals of gratitude, including the offering of the first gifts of each harvest to the sacred place that holds memory and honors God.

Sometimes people are skeptical about remembering the past. They say, "Don't get stuck in the past. Don't look back. You have to look ahead!" Very well, but one really doesn't exclude the other. We can learn from our past and maybe, just maybe get smart enough to not repeat past mistakes. We can also develop a bigger, truer picture of who we are, bigger than the picture that is popular at a given time. That knowledge of history may have important implications for our current value system and our sense of identity as a people. The Israelites, when directed to remember their humble beginnings were also encouraged to treat strangers with kindness and respect in the present times. How did our first reading end? With the following sentence: "Then you and the Levites and the foreigners residing among you shall rejoice in all the good things the LORD your God has given to you and your household." Notice, how the Levites, the non-profit workers of the time, and the foreigners are included in Israel's Thanksgiving!

So, when we don't remember we forget. The act of remembering is work. It takes intentionality. It's much easier to forget. We live in a society that tends to forget, frankly. It feeds on news, the latest, the most recent, salacious details of some scandal that finds a great echo in the public. Many of those things are simply distractions while important things are forgotten. Do we remember our roots as Americans in terms of our democracy, in terms of being an immigrant nation, in terms of the religiosity with which pioneers embraced the new world? What would Abraham Lincoln say to us today - a nation as divided as during the Civil War? What would the settlers say to us who came to this area, mostly German and Welsh people at that time, seeing us in our 21st century glory and wondering whether a neighbor knows his neighbor in this so-called "modern" world.

As we head to Thanksgiving week, and beginning with today's celebration, let us give thanks for the many blessings of the past. Some of them may go a long way back, but they were foundational - and maybe they still are. The ritual of Thanksgiving can be such an important pause button for the frantic pace of modern life, helping us to be grounded in gratitude and values that matter. Someone once wrote to me "family, friends, faith" is what matters to me. Well, show it, celebrate it, don't forget it. Honor family, faith, friends. When we don't remember we forget. When we remember, we don't forget. **Amen.**