



Village Christian Church



(Disciples of Christ)

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Hopeful Memory

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As we all know, friends, this is Memorial weekend – a time that has been set aside in our nation to remember and honor all the men and women who have died in service to our country throughout the wars that we have been involved in since 1775.

The tradition of setting aside a day to decorate the graves of fallen soldiers in cemeteries all around our nation began right after the Civil War, a conflict which claimed 620,000 American lives. It is easy to understand that that war had a profound effect on all of the families in our country and that part of the grieving process involved visiting the graves of lost fathers, brothers and sons and placing flowers there.

At first there wasn't one "official" day set aside across the nation as Memorial Day, and different communities were doing it at different times in the spring. Then, in 1868, Major General John A. Logan of the Grand Army of the Republic (an organization of Union Veterans) issued General Order #11 establishing May 30th as "Decoration Day" all across the country.

The observance of Decoration Day on May 30th grew and continued for over 100 years until Congress finally established it as a Federal holiday in 1971 and moved it to the 4th Monday in May – giving workers a 3 day holiday weekend during which to remember and honor our nation's fallen service men and women.

It would be impossible to estimate how many flowers have been placed on the graves of our country's one-and-a-quarter million plus fallen soldiers over the years. But however many it has been, it could never be too much because we truly do owe immeasurable gratitude to those who were willing to sacrifice their lives for us.

You know, in lots of speeches and things that have been written in honor of the war dead, it is mentioned that they fought for our **country** and our **nation's** freedom – but I suspect that most soldiers would define what they were willing to fight and die for in a little more personal way...

I think that most of them would say they fought to preserve the lives, future, and freedom of their families, friends and loved ones. I'd like to share a video now with you that helps say what I'm trying to say, only better.

I want to tell you that I am very grateful for Memorial Day, friends. For years, growing up and in early adulthood, I have to admit that what I loved most about it is that it is a 3-day weekend holiday that kicks off the summer with barbecues, camping trips and swim parties.

And I still love that, but now that I have lived longer and have gotten to know a lot more veterans of war, I better understand the importance of remembering the past and the sacrifices that so many have made for us.

It is important that we remember them for so many reasons! For example, so that we don't take for granted the freedom and the privileges we have in our country... so we will cherish and do things to extend and preserve those freedoms and rights to everyone we share life here with... and so that the honor and gratitude those fallen heroes deserve is given to them and they are not forgotten.

That's why Memorial Day, specifically, is so important, friends – and I hope that, whatever your plans are this weekend, they include saying a prayer and giving thanks for all the men and women who have died in service to us – and perhaps that you will visit a cemetery and put some flowers on a veteran's grave, too.

But today I also want to talk about more than just remembering fallen soldiers. I also want us to think about the importance of memories in general. For you see, remembering the past is important for both our present and the future in many ways.

And one of them is that remembering allows us to honor and keep that which has been instrumental in shaping us into who we are. None of us are truly self-made. There are people and events in our lifetimes who and which have impacted us in profound ways, making us who we are.

And there are also people and events from before our time who and which have created the realities and situations into which we were born – and thus they also have had a huge effect on how we live, what we know and experience in the world, and what we believe and aspire to.

So, it's important for us to remember as much of the past as we can – even the bad stuff – if we want to understand ourselves better and make conscious choices about being the people we want to be.

By remembering as much and as accurately as possible, we can identify things in our history which have not been good and work to change and improve on them. Plus, we can also lay claim to the good things and good people we want to keep and emulate.

I know all of us have had special people in our lives who are no longer with us and we miss them dearly. I'm also sure that we've all had some opportunities, talents and abilities we used to get joy from but they have faded away now.

We cannot go back in time to recapture those people and those experiences, but we can keep the love and happiness they brought if we embrace our memory of them.

Remembering helps us to honor and keep that which has been important to us, and to tap into the power of the goodness we have received from the past for the living of today.

A second reason remembering is so important is because it is the only way we gain wisdom. Whether it is from our own personal experiences or from the collective experiences of humanity, we need to learn from the past if we want to avoid living blindly and foolishly in the present.

One of the best quotes I've ever heard is that those who are unwilling to admit their mistakes are unable to learn from them – and I think we can all agree that is tragic, because we all make mistakes and the only road to improvement is to learn from them.

But I also want to point out the other side of that same coin: Which is that we can learn from our successes too! **All** of the past... the good and bad... the big and small things... the ancient and more recent... our own and humanity's ... It all holds lessons that can give us wisdom for today and remembering is the key to gaining it.

A third reason remembering is so important is all about hope. Even if we leave faith out of the conversation for the moment and think only about human accomplishments or amazing events in nature – there is a lot there that can inspire us and give us hope.

People who accomplished great things and who displayed great love, perseverance, and wisdom can inspire us to greater things. Incredible phenomena in nature and animals (like the vastness of the oceans, ancient fossils, and beautiful rainbows) can also teach us and inspire us in life... And inspiration gives hope!

There is another arena in life, however, in which I think remembering the past is even more important – And that is in our faith. Failing to remember great people and great lessons from nature is bad enough – but a failure in our faith memory can erode the foundation of our relationship with God, and that is tragic!

A quick scan of the Bible will easily reveal the importance that the scriptures place on remembering the works and revelations of God throughout history. All the way through the pages of every book in the Bible, we can find references to monuments, memorial feasts, and ritually repeated stories which serve to reinforce the sacred memory of the people of God.

In various ways, the great saving acts of God have been recorded and presented to that we will not forget what God has done for our, and our ancestors, sake.

The Joshua text we read today is one example. The chapters before the part we read tell the story of the Israelite people's long awaited entry into the promised land. After 40 years of wilderness wandering, they finally reached their destination. The swollen Jordan River blocked their way into the land, but they did not stop.

When the priests who were carrying the Ark of the Covenant put their feet into the river, the water stopped flowing and the people crossed over on dry ground – Just as their forbearers had when they escaped the Egyptian army through the Red Sea.

When they all finished crossing the Jordan, Joshua had a simple monument built to commemorate the wondrous event – and it served to remind the people and their descendants that their progress (indeed, their very existence) was in the hands of a powerful and faithful God.

In a similar way, the Passover feast which Moses instituted reminded the people that it was God and not they themselves who brought about their liberation from slavery in Egypt. Jacob placed a stone marker where God spoke his promise to him in a dream. God placed a rainbow in the sky as a reminder of his covenant with the earth...

And the list just goes on and on and on. With a pounding insistence, the call to remember the great acts of God – and his wisdom, power and love – are repeated over and over again in the scriptures.

This emphasis is there not because God needs us to remember, but because we need to remember for our own good. Those who forget the past fall into thanklessness and easily take for granted all that they have.

People who forget the value of their heritage and the source of their blessings often begin thinking they are self-reliant. Then, when a bigger problem than they can handle comes along, they have cut themselves off from their true source of strength.

The scriptures continually remind us, the readers, of the great things God has done in the past and the great love he has for us so that we won't fall victim to foolish pride and cut ourselves off from our greatest help... So that we can live gratefully and with confidence in God... And so that we can look to the future with hope!

Let's think for a moment, now, about other kinds of memorials outside of the Bible. People in every culture and generation have created memorials to people and events they consider worthy of remembrance for future generations. In many ways that is good and can be inspirational...

There is a problem, however, with some memorials in that they may present only the side or characteristic or accomplishment that the creators of the monument or story think was good about the person or event they want remembered...

But they cover up or ignore the worst parts of our history or the character flaws in the hero. It's natural that we want our memorials to comfort and reassure us – but we lose a lot of the learning and the opportunities to be better when we gloss over our history and glorify people who were flawed (which is all of us).

Another pitfall that can occur when we are remembering the past (especially as we get older) is that we can sometimes cling to the past as a way of avoiding the problems of the present and the challenges of the future. In those cases, we are tempted to glorify days gone by and only talk about how great they were.

It's good to have fond memories of the past and even to long for some of the things of the past – but it's dangerous to use rose-colored glasses that get us to thinking that the best days of life are already gone by.

As people of faith, God hasn't given us memorials that lock us in the past or gloss over the hard and challenging parts of life. Instead, God has given us what I call Hopeful Memory.

Hopeful memory doesn't drag us into the past and lock us there. And hopeful memory doesn't tell us that the best of life has already come and gone. Instead, hopeful memory propels us into the future with God at our side.

When the prophets of old called on God's people to remember the works the Lord had done in the past, it was to prepare them for the future that they were facing.. And I think that the purpose of reading the stories in scripture of all the things that God has done is still the same for us...

We are to remember the wonders of the past so that our lives will be open to the even greater wonders God will do for us in the future!

One hopeful memorial that we in our church participate in every Sunday is the Lord's Supper, or communion. This memorial doesn't ignore or falsely glorify all the aspects of our Savior's sacrifice. The bread and cup we partake of reminds us of his broken body and spilled blood, and we do not gloss over the deceit, cruelty and pain he suffered...

But there is also a lot more to our remembrance at our Lord's table than just that. It reminds us of the incredible depth and power of God's love – a love that will not let us go and always reaches out to us despite our sinfulness. Plus, better yet, it reminds us that that love cannot be defeated – not even by death – and points us toward the true and eternal life that Jesus promised.

The memorial we observe every week in our worship is a cornerstone of our faith because it points us not only toward our past from which we have much to learn, but also toward our future in which we will have much to celebrate.

I've told you the story that I am about to use as an illustration before, but I think it's a good enough one that you won't mind my sharing it again with you here:

In 1969 Clarence Jordan, the author of the Cotton Patch version of the Bible and founder of an inter-racial community and ministry in Georgia (called Koinonia Farms), died of a heart attack. His work had stirred up opposition from racists in the area but he persisted, trusting in God's love and promises for the future.

Millard Fuller, the founder of Habitat for Humanity, officiated at Jordan's funeral during which he was buried on a hillside on his farm. Just after the casket was lowered into the ground and the grave was filled, an unexpected thing happened...

Fuller's 2-year-old daughter stepped up to the grave and sang the only song she knew: *Happy birthday to you... Happy birthday to you... Happy birthday dear Clarence... Happy birthday to you.*

That is a strange and yet (*when you think about it*) appropriate song to be sung at a person of faith's funeral. Out of the heart, mind and mouth of a 2-year old, the promise that we can all look forward to because of God's love was expressed.

Thank you for listening today, friends. This weekend, and tomorrow, as we think about and honor the fallen soldiers (as well as other people in our lives) who are not here in the world with us anymore, I pray that it will not merely be an exercise of looking behind and dwelling on the past –

But that it will also be a time filled with gratitude for the abundant, eternal life that God promised to them and to us! For we live in the light of the resurrection, friends, and all the hopeful memories that our faith and Bible are filled with call us to trust in the One who will never let us go. Amen.