

“Memory, Love, and Salvation”
Deuteronomy 8:12–15, Luke 15:11–20
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Today’s sermon title may sound a little strange to you. How can *memory, love, and salvation* work together? We perceive and understand love only through our personal experiences. The love of God, salvation, can’t exist or doesn’t have any meaning if we do not personally experience love in our life. Experiences are powerful ways to help us believe that something is real, and we keep the experiences real only in our memories. The good memories will be transformed into the power of love. Our Christian faith is indebted to countless witnesses and to collective memories of faith. We are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, and we stand on their shoulders. I ponder the importance of good memories when I think of love and salvation. Speaking of memories, I have a fun story to share with you.

At a bowling alley, two men were talking about marriage. One man said, “My wife and I argue a lot, and every time we argue she gets *historical*.” His friend interrupted him, “You meant to say that she gets *hysterical*, didn’t you?” The first man responded, “No, when my wife and I argue, she doesn’t get hysterical; she gets *historical*. She drags up everything from the past and holds it against me.”

Of course, I am not talking about negative memories. They are powerful, too. It would be a great blessing if you got *historical* about the positive memories in your past and found it easy to forget or let go of the hurtful things in your memories. This would lead you to a shortcut to happiness. Memories are powerful. My spiritual mentor and I plan to have a family dinner sometime in September. He loves to eat every kind of food I might choose except Vietnamese dishes. I asked him why. He explained to me he is sensitive to the smell of Vietnamese food not because of the actual smell but because he has negative and painful memories from his participation in the Vietnam War 50 years ago. Whenever he smells certain herbs in food, they immediately bring up his negative memories, even though these memories are half a century old. How powerful memories are!

On the other hand, our good memories are bits of love that will sustain us and keep providing us with meaning in life. We find the meaning of life, a reason to survive, in our good memories, especially when we are overwhelmed or challenged by suffering and situations of despair. Rethink your faith and understanding of God’s love. Does your faith begin with doctrinal theology or from your personal experiences on your life journey? Without your experiences

and memories and your present life, you would not be able to discover the meaning of life, love, and salvation.

Last Friday, I officiated at the graveside service of Judy's older son, Richard Lance Shearer. He had just turned 50 this year. His sudden death caused shock and numbness, not only for Judy and but also for all of us as well. I asked God, "Why, God?" When John Shearer was informed about his brother's death, he challenged me, in his deep frustration and shock: "Pastor, why does God hate us?" Honestly, I couldn't find any words or way to comfort him. Lance's unexpected death brought too much deep pain and despair to all of us. I especially worried about Judy Shearer, Lance's mother, and how I might help her handle this traumatic death in this difficult time. Truly, our life is not our own—it is in God's hands. But we want to know how we should manage and face challenges such as this unexpected death. Indeed, "Life is a mysterious 'present' from God and we all are invited to live in this 'present.'"

Viktor Frankl, the author of the book *Man's Search for Meaning*, advises us, "When we are no longer able to change a situation—just think of an incurable disease such as inoperable cancer—we are challenged to change ourselves."¹ How can we change ourselves, survive, and continue to live for life when life seems to be meaningless? The key is our good memories! The more precious memories we cherish, the more meaning we can find in life! We should cherish the present and create more meaningful memories; these will turn into love and will sustain us when we are challenged.

Last Sunday, I shared a story about my family's camping trip with you. After the service, one of the church members encouraged me to keep journaling my memories and stories. I appreciate her advice. She reminded me that she has raised five children! I am sure that she has many rich memories and much love that has filled her life! We live only in the present, and the present will become the past. In order to keep us grounded and living in the present, we have to accept a reality that is challenging and adjust ourselves to this new reality. Only love can help us face our challenges, and our good memories will support us when we are going through a difficult time. There is an Asian wisdom saying:

If you are depressed, you are living in the past.
If you are anxious, you are living in the future.
If you are at peace, you are living in the present.²

The entire story of the Old Testament is all about 'remembrance of the past,' and the leader Moses repeatedly reminded the Israelites of what God had done for them. Moses said, "Do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God,

¹ Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), p. 112.

² Lao Tzu, "Quotable Quote," *goodreads*, <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/523350-if-you-are-depressed-you-are-living-in-the-past>, accessed July 22, 2017.

who brought you out of the land Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” For the Israelites and the Jews, even in the contemporary world, their Passover experience of the Israelites’ history during the Exodus is a powerful experience of God’s salvation, intimate love, and mighty power that keeps them moving forward, not giving up. Because of their deep trust in God’s saving grace in their history, they are not stuck in the past but are always standing in the present, with their eyes seeing the future as guided by God’s mighty hands.

Our second Scripture reading is the well-known story of the Prodigal Son. After the younger son had wasted his money and spent everything, he had to face the bitter reality of his crisis. What really helped him turn around and led him to go back to his father’s house? A phrase in verse 17 offers a clue: “When he came to himself” (NRSV). A paraphrased Bible version, *The Message*, puts it, “That brought him to his senses.” His good memories brought him the courage to return to his father. The end of this story reminds us that the second son was accepted and received a warm welcome from his father. The second son’s salvation started from his good memories.

Every month we take Communion and remember our Christ Jesus’ saving grace when we receive the bread and the cup. According to Luke, “Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me’” (Luke 22:19 NRSV). Jesus commands us not to merely commemorate the past event. Instead, he asks us to remember Jesus’ saving grace and sacrificial act of love as a good memory that will transform our lives into purpose-oriented lives.

Think about your very best memory of something that happened in your life. God gave us life, and we came to this life as God’s precious ‘present’ to our families, communities, and dear friends. In a sense, our Fair Oaks United Methodist Church is called to be here to create ‘good memories’ for our community. We all are God’s great presents to one another. Therefore, do not get stuck in the past. Give thanks for the present moment and cherish your memories. And nourish your life with your good memories. Amen.