Sermon 8 – "The Room Called Remember"
Psalm 105:1-5 Hebrews 13:1-2, 6-8

Memory is a precious thing, something we often take for granted until we begin to lose it. A man once had a cabin by a lake in Alaska, with pontoons on a small airplane so he could land directly in front of his door. On one trip, he was not thinking, and started to land the plane on a nearby airfield, forgetting that he had switched his landing gear from wheels to pontoons. His wife saved the day by yelling, "You can't land here without wheels!" Just in time he yanked up the nose of the plane, and flew to the water in front of the cabin, admitting that what he about did was one of his dumber things. And with that, he opened the plane door, stepped out, and fell into the water.

Memory loss can be much more serious when it is brought on by things like Korsakou's syndrome, a profound and permanent devastation of memory, caused by such things as alcoholism or Alzheimers. Huge blocks of a person's life can be wiped out of memory and never retrieved. A man who watched his aging mother lose her memory said this, "You have to begin to lose your memory, if only in bits and pieces, to realize that memory is what makes our lives. Our memory is our coherence, our reason, our feeling, our actions."

An historian named Milan Hubl once wrote, "The first step in liquidating a people is to erase its memory, destroy its books, its culture, its history. Before long the nation will forget what it is and what it does." That's why we have things like Memorial day to remember the Civil

War, remember Pearl Harbor, remember the Maine, remember the Alamo, remember the Holocaust.

But remembering should be something broader, not just of negative, terrible things, but also of positive, uplifting things. The Bible encourages this larger remembering over 200 times, urging the people of God to remember - - to remember God's wonderful acts, to remember God's commandments, to remember to remember God's sabbath day, to remember God's promises, to remember God's mercy, to remember God's power. Jesus tells his followers partaking of the Last Supper, "remember me." In Psalm 105:1-5 we are told to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises, to rejoice in our hearts, to seek the Lord and divine strength, to remember all God's wonderful works. In Hebrews 13 we are instructed to let mutual love continue, to show hospitality to strangers, for in doing so some have entertained angels without knowing it. We are to live in the confidence that God is our helper, and we are to remember those who brought God's word of love to us, reflecting on their lives and our own lives, imitating their faith.

Christian writer and Presbyterian minister, Frederick Buechner, tells of a dream he once had of a hotel where he was given a room that he loved, a room that gave him happiness and peace. But as the dream went on, he wandered off to other places and things, before ending up at the same hotel and given a different room, a room dark, cramped, and uncomfortable. He went to the desk, and told the clerk that he missed the old room, but didn't know where it was or how to find it. The understanding clerk told Buechner he knew the exact room, and it could

be reserved by asking for it by name. "What is its name?" Buechner asked. "The name of the room is Remember."

Reflecting on this room in his dream, Buechner writes, "In one sense the past is dead and gone, never to be repeated, over and done with, but in another sense, it is of course not done with at all or at least not done with us. Every person we have ever known, every place we have ever seen, everything that has ever happened to us -- it all lives and breathes deep in us somewhere, whether we like it or not, and sometimes it doesn't take much to bring it back to the surface in bits and pieces. A song, a book we read as a child, a stretch of road we used to travel, a falling in love at age 16, an old photograph or letter, the smells and sounds of a house that has long since disappeared, a time when laughter brought tears down our cheeks while we were with someone who died years ago, our failures, old hurts, times too beautiful to tell or too terrible to speak of."

Buechner points out that "such memories are often unchosen and haphazard, allowing us avoidance as good escape artists, permitting us to talk about almost anything under the sun except for what really matters, what is going on inside our skins. We pass the time of day. We chatter. Even when we are alone, like late evening when everybody else is in bed, when we could look back over the day, the week, the year, and try to figure out where we have come from and where we are going, what we have done and left undone, for a clue to what we are becoming, we avoid the long thoughts, turn on the TV or pick up a newspaper or book, or do some chore. We cling to the surface out of fear of what lies beneath, tired,

confused, needing escape."

Then Buechner concludes. "There is a deep need to enter the Room called Remember, that still room within us all where the past lives on as part of the present, where the dead are alive again, where we are the most alive ourselves to the long journeys of our lives with all their twistings and turnings, and to where our journeys have brought us, the room where with patience, charity, quietness of heart, we remember consciously to remember the lives we and others have lived. The remembering that goes on in this room is purposeful. To enter this room means not to pick up a book for once or turn on the radio, but to let the mind journey gravely, deliberately, back through the years that have gone by, but are not gone. To enter this room means a deeper, slower kind of remembering, it means remembering as a searching and a finding. It means to realize we have survived, you and I. After 20, 40, 60, or 80 years, we have made it to this year, this day. We needn't have made it. There were times we never thought we would and nearly didn't. There were times we almost hoped we wouldn't. We have chosen wrong roads or right roads for wrong reasons. We have loved and failed to love. To enter the Room called Remember is to recall countless times we might have given up or gone under. Only in the Room called Remember can we find the peace that comes from looking back and remembering, that even when we failed to see it, we were never alone. There was and is always Someone who remembers us."

In this time of transition here at West Richmond, having pastor David Whitten retire after 7 years of

service with us, it is especially important to enter that Room called Remember. We can start by remembering the good things Dave helped us do. We can go back much further and remember that Brethren didn't even exist in this area till 1918.

A few Brethren in Richmond wanted to form a fellowship, with B.F. Glick sending a letter to the Mission Board of the Eastern District of Virginia, informing them that Brethren were meeting for SS and holding worship services twice a month. The board then sent a pastor once a month for a year and a half, though there was a 5 month stopping, then a restarting, then another stopping. But the Brethren kept meeting in homes and outdoors. Under the leadership of J.N. Zeigler and more help from the district, the fledgling Brethren rented a hall in 1923, before purchasing a big three story house at 2215 East Broad Street in the Church Hill section of the city. The house had room for worship, SS classes, living space for a pastor, additional apartment rooms, and a vacant lot.

Famed Brethren educator I.N.H Beahm, having taught in public schools and at Bridgewater College, helped bring support from the district to the Richmond effort. He was at times an outspoken leader, a little elfish man and the father of missionary and Bethany Seminary professor Anna Mow. As an evangelist he referred to himself in the third person as "Brother Beahm," and once arriving late at a district conference, but wanting to sit at the front because he was short and hard of hearing, crawled up to his place during an offering prayer interlude.

After three Virginia districts consolidated in 1928, borrowed funds of $3,711 purchased the Broad Street property that had been put up for sale, and a salary of $1,500 was provided to support a full time pastor L.A Bowman. The church grew from 46 to 168. Other pastors, some students at Union Theological Seminary, came and went, but despite erecting a chapel, the 1940's saw interest and participation declining. After much discussion, West Richmond decided to sell the property in 1946, a sale legally finalized in 1951.

For four years the congregation met in a small Episcopal chapel in the Glenwood Farms area, then moved to a shopping center community building. Only a few remaining members continued to meet for fellowship and planning, before the Hopewell Church of the Brethren helped bring renewal at a new site near McGuire hospital, a site that was later sold because it's value had doubled in price.

The congregation then met at the Glen Lea Elementary school on the east side, before purchasing 5.6 acres from the Historic Hill Plantation owned by a Smith family, a plantation that had a White building farmhouse that eventually hosted worship, SS, scouts, refugees, square dances. A $24,975 parsonage was erected in 1957, with full time pastors beginning to serve, and the present sanctuary completed in 1961. In 1988, the congregation built a $426,000 addition, with a multi-purpose room, a kitchen, bathrooms, offices, a choir room, and SS rooms. An ongoing craft group and annual yard sale was formed out of bazar fund raising efforts for the building project.

Some in the congregation began serving meals at a Hull Street shelter in 1985, along with providing lodging and meals to the homeless under a Caritas program in 1988. The Three Chopt Nursery was given a home here in the same year, till the congregation took it over in 1991, eventually changing the name to Hilltop Preschool, which now has more than 90 kids. The church added a paid minister of music in 1990, a new organ and altar cloths in 1994, an extended chancel and baptistry in 2001, a Grand Piano in 2004, an expanded sound system in 2007, a YAYA position in 2011, monitors in 2017 to handle live streaming and full internet web access.

The facility has been offered to the community for use by Scouts, a Senior Connections program, the Skipwith Farms Civic Association, the Richmond Mennonite Fellowship. The spirit of God in the West Richmond people has continued to live on through worship, uplifting music, SS and Bible study groups, fellowship, mission trips, Disaster Ministries, and Crop walks. We continue trying to express the core beliefs of free choice in religion, close-knit community, following Jesus' example of peacemaking and service, practicing simple living, engaging life with integrity and well being, and taking our cues from the NT and not the culture around us.

Why is it important to remember our story? It is not that we are to go back to the old days, if there was and even is such a thing. Good old days with those like me, might actually have been some bad old days. It is important to to note that in the Bible memory is not harkening back to do things like it was done in the past.

Rather it is laying hold of the Spirit of God, the spirit of faith, the spirit of persistence, the spirit of hope, the spirit of love that was in the hearts of those who have gone before us. This congregation has shut down several times in the past. But a few pressed on. We are fewer in number these days, we wonder if we can press on, but if we enter the Room called Remember and recall God's wonderful works, we might well discover that we can continue to entertain angels without knowing it. There is a path forward if we seek it.

A mother once found how to enter the Room called Remember. She often set the family table with her good china, even when no guests were expected.

When questioned by a neighbor, the mother responded, "If you set your best table for special guests and outsiders, why not for your own family?" "You might chip the china." "Well, a few chips are a small price to pay for the way we always feel as a family using lovely dishes. Besides, chips have a story to tell."

The mother walked over to the cupboard, took down a chipped plate. "This happened when I was 17. My brothers needed extra help with the last of the season's hay, so they hired a young buck, invited him to dinner, and directed him to sit next to me. I nearly died, so flustered that I dropped his plate against the casserole dish, knocking out a chip. I married that man." A daughter, overhearing the conversation, sneaked into her mother's bedroom, looked in her mom's special jewelry box, and there, with a red ruby ring given to her mother by an aunt and a pair of delicate pearl earrings from a

grandmother, was an ordinary chip of white glass wrapped in red felt. The daughter took it to the kitchen cabinet, and sure enough it matched the chipped plate. She later wrote, "One of my sisters asked mother for the antique ruby ring, and another sister for the pearl earrings, but I'd like the momento of a little glass chip representing an extraordinary woman's extraordinary life of loving."

Let us, like those who went before us, saints if you please, loved ones, people with gifts and chips, at times even chips on their shoulders, let us press on. We may have all taken chips out of each other through years together in community, but the important thing is that there is Jesus-like love at our core, a love that continues to calls us to find ways to be God's people in a new time, knowing that there is a Divine Someone who always remembers us.