

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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TOO IMPORTANT TO FORGET

Deuteronomy 8:1-18

Lieutenant Commander Edward H. O'Hare (U.S. Navy), known to his family and friends as "Butch," was a 1937 graduate of the Naval Academy. During World War II, he was a fighter pilot assigned to the aircraft carrier Lexington in the south Pacific. For his heroism in combat, O'Hare would become the Navy's first Ace of World War II, and the first naval aviator to be awarded the nation's highest decoration, the Congressional Medal of Honor.

The defining moment in his military career took place on February 20, 1942, just a few months after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor stunned our nation and hurled us into the war.

The Lexington had been assigned the dangerous mission of penetrating enemy-held waters in the South Pacific in an attempt to destroy a Japanese shipping port in the area. Unfortunately, while still 400 miles from its destination, the Lexington was discovered by a Japanese flying boat on a reconnaissance mission. The Japanese "Snooper" was shot down, but not before it had radioed the Lexington's position.

Six Wildcat fighters were dispatched from the Lexington to intercept nine twin-engine enemy bombers. Each of the Wildcats destroyed a Japanese bomber, and they damaged two more. The Lexington's anti-aircraft guns took care of the rest.

In the meantime, another squadron of Japanese bombers was speeding toward the Lexington. Six more Wildcat fighters, one of them piloted by Butch O'Hare, roared off the deck of the Lexington to stop them. O'Hare and his wingman spotted the V-formation of enemy bombers first and dived to try to head them off. The other pilots were too far away to reach the enemy planes before they released their bombs. In addition, O'Hare's wingman was forced to turn away after discovering his guns were jammed. Standing alone between the Japanese bombers and the Lexington was Butch O'Hare.

What O'Hare did that day was either courageously heroic or crazy. Or both. Without hesitation, he roared full throttle into the enemy formation. With his wing-mounted guns blazing as he charged in, O'Hare surprised one enemy plane after another. He weaved in and out of the now broken formation, firing at as many planes as possible until his ammunition was completely spent. One by one he attacked the oncoming bombers until five had been damaged. Reinforcements in the form of other American fighters finally arrived and were successful in warding off the remaining Japanese planes. Butch O'Hare's daring actions that day in all likelihood saved the Lexington and her entire crew.

Why do I tell you this story today? Because some things are too important to forget. Less than two years later, on the night of November 27, 1943, Lieutenant Commander Butch O'Hare was killed in aerial combat at the age of 29. But some people who knew him and knew of his heroic actions would not allow his memory to die. A few years after the war, they named an airport after him. And today, O'Hare Airport in Chicago remains a tribute to his memory and a reminder of the courage and heroism of a man who gave his life in the service of our country.

Some things in life are too important to forget. Which is why we celebrate Memorial Day – so that we will not forget the price which has been paid in blood for our liberty, and the ultimate sacrifice made by more than a million American men and women who, in the course of our nation's history, have given their lives for our country.

Sadly, however, the true meaning and purpose of Memorial Day have been forgotten by many Americans. Most of us, it seems, treat the holiday as just another day to go shopping or to welcome the start of summer. In fact, when a group of children touring the U. S. Capitol were asked about the meaning and significance of Memorial Day, their resounding response was: "It's the day the pools open!"

Some things, like the heroism and sacrifices of those who have gone before us, and put themselves in harm's way, and spilled their blood in defense of our country and the values and ideals we cherish, are just too important to forget. And we forget them at our own peril.

Memorial Day, as you probably know, was originally known as Decoration Day. It was a day set aside to honor the nation's Civil War dead – more than a half million in number – by decorating their graves. General James Garfield, later to become President, made a speech at Arlington National Cemetery during the first Decoration Day observance in 1868, after which some 5,000 participants decorated the graves of more than 20,000 Union and Confederate soldiers laid to rest there. By the late 1800s, communities large and small across the country had begun to celebrate Memorial Day. Following World War I, observances began to honor not only those who died in the Civil War, but those killed in all of America's wars, so that today we honor those from the Revolutionary War to the Iraq War who gave their lives for their country.

Some things are just too important to forget.

From Lexington and Concord to Valley Forge and Yorktown, from Bull Run and Antietam to Gettysburg and Vicksburg, from Pearl Harbor and Bataan to Normandy and Iwo Jima, from Korea and Vietnam to Kuwait, Iraq and Afghanistan, it is imperative that we not forget the terror and hellishness of war, nor fail to pay tribute and honor the memory of those who, in their service to our country and its ideals, gave, as Abraham Lincoln said in his Gettysburg Address, "the last full measure of devotion."

But this message is not simply a lesson in civics or American history. Nor is it merely a call to patriotic fervor. It *is* an exhortation to remember, because some things are too

important to forget. And forgetfulness – in the spiritual realm – can be hazardous to your heart.

Moses understood that. He knew how important it was for the people of God to remember God, to remember His word to them and His gracious provision for their needs. Thirteen times in the Book of Deuteronomy, including twice in the verses we read from Deuteronomy 8, Moses urged the people of Israel to remember. And sprinkled throughout are warnings about the danger of forgetting, with the dire consequences that would result.

When things go well for you in the land God has promised to give you, Moses says in verse 18, “remember the LORD your God.” In verse 2, he counsels the people to remember how the Lord led you, remember how the Lord took care of you, remember how the Lord provided for all your needs in the desert after He brought you out of Egypt.

And he adds this warning beginning in verse 10: When you have eaten and are satisfied, when you have become prosperous and comfortable, when your life is filled to overflowing with good things, be careful! Be careful that your hearts do not become proud and deceive you into thinking that you have only yourselves to thank and praise for the good life you enjoy. Be careful, says Moses, that you do not forget God (8:10-18).

Why did Moses make such a big deal about remembering? Why is it so incumbent on the people of God to remember? Why is it so imperative that we not forget?

To put it another way, we might ask: Why is history so important? What is it about the past that makes it so critically important that we not forget?

One answer, of course, is that history is important because those who do not remember the past and learn its lessons are often doomed to repeat it. A second reason is that, for better or for worse, we have all been influenced and shaped by the events of the past, by the ideas and actions, the values and decisions, of those who have gone before us. This is undoubtedly true in the history of our nation. And it is just as true in the heritage of our faith and the history of the Christian church. We stand on the shoulders, if you will, of the saints – the followers of Christ – who have preceded us. As the Bible says in Hebrews 12, we’re surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who remained faithful and true to the Lord as we run with perseverance and resolute faith the race marked out for us (Hebrews 12:1). In ways both big and small, our lives have been influenced and shaped by the past.

But there is yet a third reason why it is so imperative for us to remember the past. Understanding the past is important because history is the arena in which God has revealed Himself and His plan and His will and His truth. It is in history – in His dealings with His creation in general and with humankind in particular – that God has made Himself and His character known to us. It is in history that God has provided for our salvation. It is in history that God is working out His eternal purposes for our redemption and His glory. It is in the arena of history – in His dealings with sin-stained

mortals – that we see what God has done for us and what He desires from us. If we are to grasp rightly who God is and what we are, if we are to be in a right relationship with God and live in a way that gives Him the glory and honor He deserves, then we must not forget. Because some things are too important to forget.

You know the old saying about a turtle on a fencepost: If you see a turtle on a fencepost, you can be pretty sure it didn't get there by itself. If that turtle starts to brag about how smart or agile or resourceful it was to get up on that fencepost, you know it is not telling the truth. The same thing is true of us, when we take credit or congratulate ourselves for blessings we have received, or when we say: "Look at me! Look at what I've done! See how smart – or strong or talented or clever or committed – I am!" instead of acknowledging how good, how gracious, how generous, and how wonderful God is.

Forgetting God and His goodness can lead to a blind and bloated spirit of pride. And pride is hazardous to our hearts. John Ortberg tells this story about a Fortune 500 CEO who pulled into a service station to get gas several years ago. He went inside to pay, and when he came out he was surprised to see his wife deep in conversation with the service station attendant. It turns out that she knew him. In fact, back in high school, before she met her husband, she had dated this man.

The CEO got in the car, and the two drove in silence. He was feeling pretty good about himself when he broke the silence and said to his wife: "I bet I know what you were thinking. I bet you were thinking you're glad you married me, a Fortune 500 CEO, and not him, a service station attendant."

His wife replied: "No, I was thinking that if I had married him, he would be a Fortune 500 CEO and you would be a service station attendant."

She put him in his place, didn't she?

Moses, as the people of Israel stood on the edge of the Promised Land, wanted them to understand their place, to see their smallness before God and their absolute dependence on His grace. So he reminded them of all that God had done for them. He reminded them that it was God and God alone who had provided food and clothing and shelter and protection for them in the wilderness. It was in the wilderness, Moses says, that they learned to trust God. It was in the wilderness experience that they came to understand God's sufficiency and their inadequacy. And now, with the wilderness behind them and the land of Canaan before them, Moses urged them not to forget. With great passion he pleaded with them to remember the Lord and His goodness to them, and to hold fast to His Word, lest their hearts become hard and they turn away from the One who had led them by the hand and had liberated them from slavery in Egypt, the One who had kept them safe through many dangers, toils, and snares, the One who had proved again and again to be true to His Word and faithful to His promises.

But do you know what happened? Time and again the people of Israel forgot. Time and again they turned away from God. And time and again they suffered the consequences of

their folly and hardheartedness, until finally God said, “Enough!” and pronounced His judgment against the nation. First the northern kingdom of Israel was conquered by Assyria in 722 B.C., and then the southern kingdom of Judah fell to Babylon in 587 B.C. The reason? God spelled it out in Jeremiah 2:32, where He said: “My people have forgotten me, days without number.”

Like the people of Israel, you and I must not forget the Lord God who has revealed Himself to us in grace and truth and holiness and power. We must not forget all that God in His goodness has done for us. We must not forget the precepts and promises of God. Some things are just too important to forget. And we forget at our own peril.

In Ecclesiastes 12, near the end of his musings on the meaninglessness and the meaning of life, Solomon offered this advice: “Remember your Creator in the days of your youth” (12:1). In *The Message* it says: “Honor and enjoy your Creator while you’re still young, before the years take their toll and your vigor wanes, before your vision dims and the world blurs and the winter years keep you close to the fire.”

For some of us, it is too late to remember our Creator in the days of our youth, for the simple reason that the days of our youth are history. They are in the past. But for each of us, regardless of our age, there is today.

As long as it is today for you, as long as the Lord gives you life on this earth, remember Him. Remember the One who made you and knew you, even in your mother’s womb. Remember the God who loves you so much that He sent His own Son into the world to die in your place. Remember the God who has promised never to leave you or forsake you. Remember the God who has promised that His grace will be sufficient for you, no matter what (2 Corinthians 12:9), the God whose will for our lives will never take us where His grace cannot keep us. Remember the God who, in His mercy and grace and power, forgives your sins and heals your diseases. Remember the God who lifts you out of the pit of discouragement, despair and darkness, and crowns you with love and compassion. Remember the God who satisfies your soul with His good gifts. Remember the God who gives you strength for every today and hope for every tomorrow. Remember Him, and do not forget all His benefits, as David says in Psalm 103 (103:2-5).

God knows how prone we are to forgetfulness. That is why He has given us signs and symbols and memorials throughout history to remind us of His promises and provisions and enduring faithfulness.

He gave the rainbow in the sky as a sign of His covenant promise to Noah in Genesis 9 – and to us – that He would never again destroy all life on the earth with a flood. Even today, the rainbow is not simply a thing of beauty, but a reminder in the sky that a promise is a promise, and God keeps His.

He instituted the Passover observance as an annual reminder to the people of Israel and their descendants of their deliverance from captivity in Egypt by the power of His hand, foreshadowing the deliverance of all God’s people from our captivity to sin through the

sacrifice of His Son Jesus Christ, the true Passover Lamb who gave His life to set us free (John 1:29; 1 Corinthians 5:7).

He gave the people of Israel first the tabernacle and then the temple in Jerusalem as visible symbols of His presence in their midst and of His awesome holiness.

He gave us the cross, a Roman instrument of unimaginable suffering and humiliation and death, as a symbol of the depth of His redeeming love for us.

He gave us the empty tomb of Easter morning as a signal that the cross was not the final verdict on Jesus. And that death will not have the last word in our lives. The empty tomb stands as an enduring reminder of God's resurrection power and the resurrection victory of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And Jesus Himself gave us the Lord's Supper (or Communion), which we will celebrate together next Sunday, as a visible and perpetual commemoration of what He did for us and for our salvation on the cross, to be celebrated until the end of time.

Why? Because some things are just too important to forget.

John Stott has written that the epitaph over Israel's grave was "They Soon Forgot," and it was to overcome our forgetfulness of Christ crucified that Jesus deliberately instituted the Lord's Supper as a feast of remembrance, a visible "forget-me-not."

In the last letter we have from Paul, as he neared the finish line in his life, the apostle wrote to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:8: "Remember Jesus Christ." He says it in such a way that what he means is: "Keep on remembering Jesus." Not just at this or that particular moment, but at every moment. *Never* forget His claim on your life.

Why?

Because He and He alone is Lord.

Because there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12).

Because He is the way, the truth and the life, and no one comes to the Father except through Him (John 14:6).

Because He is the gospel in which we hope (2 Timothy 2:8). He is our only hope of cleansing from sin and guilt, our only hope of heaven.

Don't let this Memorial Day weekend pass without taking time to remember courageous soldiers like Butch O'Hare and all the fallen heroes who have given their lives for our country. May we never forget their sacrifices for us.

And take time out to remember the Lord our God and the abundance of His grace to you. Remember what He has done for you in the death of Jesus our Savior on the cross. And give thanks to God with a grateful heart.

Lord, let it be so. For some things are just too important to forget. Amen.