

September 6, 2026 — Sermon

Scripture Reading: Exodus 12:1–14

Gospel Reading: Matthew 18:15–20

“How We Remember”

After my wife came to Wisconsin, all of a sudden, several people started asking us to have supper together. And I thought, “Wait a minute. This did not happen very often when I was living here alone. Did you not want to have supper with me before? Were you all just waiting for my wife to come?” I’m kidding. Of course, I know what you mean. You want to welcome my wife, and I really appreciate that.

But this small thing made me think about something. The same event can become a very different story depending on how we interpret it. I could remember it this way: “How kind. People really want to welcome my wife.” Or I could remember it this way: “Apparently, nobody wanted to eat with me when I was alone.” The facts are the same, but the story I tell about those facts can be very different. We interpret the past, and the way we remember shapes the way we live. That brings us to today’s reading from Exodus.

In Exodus 12, God gives the Israelites instructions for observing the Passover and tells them to remember this day from generation to generation. Why? Passover reminded Israel who they were. Even generations later, when they had never personally lived as slaves in Egypt, they were still to gather and remember: We were slaves, and God delivered us. Their past was painful. They had been enslaved and oppressed. Their freedom had been taken away. Even the lives of their children had been threatened. God never told them to pretend that none of that had happened. Instead, God taught them how to remember it. Israel could have remembered its story only by saying, “Look at what Egypt did to us.” And that would have been true.

But Passover taught them to remember a larger story: “Look at what God did for us.” We were slaves, but God delivered us. We were powerless, but God acted. We could not save ourselves, but God made a way. The painful memory did not disappear. But Pharaoh no longer got to define their story. God’s deliverance did. Faith teaches us not only what to remember, but how to remember.

And I think this is where forgiveness begins. We often hear the phrase, "Forgive and forget." But Christian forgiveness does not mean erasing the past. It does not mean saying, "It never happened," or pretending that something wrong was actually okay. Forgiveness does not erase the past. It refuses to let the past control the future. Maybe someone really did wrong you. Maybe you did nothing wrong. Maybe you are still angry or hurt. And maybe you are not ready to forgive yet. Forgiveness is not easy, and it cannot simply be forced.

But we can still ask: How do I want to carry this hurt into the future? If we hold on only to the hurt, then even when that person is no longer in front of us, what they did can continue to shape our lives. So forgiveness is not only for the person who did wrong. It is also a way of refusing to let what they did determine the direction of the rest of our lives. That takes courage. It takes wisdom. And it takes faith that our lives belong to something greater than the hurt we have received. The person who hurt me is not the lord of my life. What that person did does not get the final word. God does. That leads us to today's Gospel lesson.

In Matthew 18, Jesus talks about what to do when someone sins against us. And notice what Jesus does not say. He does not say, "Just forget about it." Instead, he says: "Go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone." Face the problem. Say what happened. If something was wrong, say that it was wrong. Because when hurt is left alone, resentment can grow, misunderstandings can deepen, and something that might once have been resolved can become much harder to untangle. So it takes courage to face a problem directly. But not the courage to attack someone or prove that I am right. It is the courage to tell the truth, to listen, and to try to build a different future. And Jesus tells us the purpose: "If the member listens to you, you have regained that one." The goal is not punishment or victory. The goal is restoration. The goal is reconciliation. Peace begins by facing the truth and refusing to let that truth destroy the future.

The history of South Africa gives us a powerful example. Nelson Mandela spent twenty-seven years in prison for resisting apartheid and later became South Africa's first Black president. When apartheid ended, the country faced a difficult question: What should we do with this long history of racism, violence, and oppression? South Africa created the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The name itself is important: Truth and Reconciliation. Not "Forget and Reconciliation." Victims were given space to tell what had happened to them. Wrongdoing had to be named. The past was not covered over. But the purpose was not to keep hatred alive. The hope was to remember the past truthfully without allowing it to determine the future of the next generation. Desmond Tutu, who chaired the commission, later titled one of his books: *No Future Without Forgiveness*. Forgiveness is not about erasing the past. Forgiveness is about opening a future.

When I look back on my own life, there are people I wish I had apologized to. There are times when I should have spoken more honestly, listened more carefully, or reached out first. The past is gone, but it remains in the way we remember it. So perhaps we need to ask ourselves: When I am struggling with someone, how am I remembering what happened? What story am I telling myself about that person? And years from now, how do I want to remember what I am going through today? Do I want to remember that resentment kept growing? Or do I want to remember that, by the grace of God, I found the courage to speak, to listen, and perhaps to begin again?

The way we remember shapes the way we live. And Christians are people who remember. We remember the death of Christ. We remember the love of Christ. We remember the grace and welcome of Christ. And we are called to extend to others what we ourselves have received from Christ. In a few moments, we will come to the Lord's Table. And Jesus says: "Do this in remembrance of me."

So the question is not simply: "Will we remember or will we forget?" The deeper question is: How will we remember? May we remember the truth without being imprisoned by the wound. May we remember God's grace without denying what happened. May we refuse to let the past control the future. The wound may be part of our story. But the wound is not the whole story. May God's grace have the final word.

Let us pray. Gracious God, teach us how to remember with faith. When we carry wounds from the past, help us to face the truth without being imprisoned by resentment. Give us courage to speak honestly, wisdom to listen, and grace to seek reconciliation. Remind us that our lives are held not by the wrongs done to us, but by your love and mercy. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.