

Why We Celebrate Anniversaries

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Deuteronomy 6:12
on September 14, 2025, with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*
I.

Yesterday, I had the distinct honor to officiate the wedding of two of our young adult members, Katie and Cory. Those two are young and in love, such a good, thoughtful pair. The wedding venue was stunning, and the scene was picture perfect. After the ceremony went off without a hitch, Katie, Cory, and I gathered to sign the marriage license with their two witnesses (and their photographer, of course). I had a momentary lapse of memory as I was signing and asked the newlyweds, “I’m sorry - what is today’s date?” Katie was the first to respond, but then her matron of honor looked at Cory with equal parts laughter and warning in her eyes. “Cory, you better remember this date for the rest of your life!” she said with a smile. And all God’s people said, amen!

II.

Anniversaries are on my mind these days. From our recent wedding anniversary, to a recent work anniversary, to our upcoming church house anniversary, these opportunities to remember aren’t just mine of course. We all experience those ebbs and flows of time, and the days we look back to remember. My sermon title implies a strong claim: “why we celebrate anniversaries” suggests I do believe we should celebrate anniversaries! (*I do! Pun intended.*) And as our guide today, we turn to the final book of the Torah for instruction and inspiration.

Here in Deuteronomy chapter 6, we find one of the most widely-known and loved passages in all of scripture. It’s often called the “Shema” in its shorthand, referencing the Hebrew word at the very beginning of the

passage, translated “hear.” “Hear, o Israel.” Meaning: listen up! Pay attention! Moses speaks, calling out to the people of Israel in the wilderness with words of God’s oneness, God’s commandment, God’s presence. “Hear o Israel,” and all of us who have lived ever since lean in to a word so clear and distilled and definitive. “Hear o Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” I imagine Moses and all the saints that followed him pointing back to this moment, this commandment, this call. It’s at the heart of it all. God is God, and we are to love God with all that we have, because God loves us with all that God has. Even Jesus said so himself.

Love God. When all else fails, love God. When the world gets bigger and noisier and more confusing, love God. When you’re in the wilderness of your life – perhaps for the first time, perhaps for a return visit – love God. When the griefs and fears of this world scream through your screens, relentless and unyielding, and you wonder how we’ll even get through it, love God. When we try to withhold parts of ourselves to remain in our control, don’t – instead, love God with all you are and with all you have: heart, soul, strength.

We don’t have to do this work on our own, though. Because at the heart of the gospel is the promise that God moves towards *us*. That like a shepherd running after the one lost sheep or the woman who won’t rest until she finds the coin, God won’t rest until Love finds us too. That no matter the wilderness of our lives, God chases after us with goodness and mercy, all the days of our lives.

So hear, o Israel! Hear, o church! *Loving God matters most.*

But the text doesn’t stop there. God knew that we humans would need a bit more instruction than that, some specifics to guide the way and ensure

this commandment remains central. So *how* might we love God with all we have? What habits might we repeat again and again? Keeping the words in our heart. Saying them again and again to our children. Talking about them everywhere we go. Binding them to our bodies. Affixing them to our home. Because all the gifts of this world are from God. “Take care,” Moses concludes, “that you do not forget the Lord.” Or in other words, *remember*.

III.

Just this past week, our nation looked back to the events of September 11, 2001. These annual remembrances aren’t just for the loved ones of those who died that day, rather they’re for all of us of course. Our children weren’t alive in 2001, yet remain curious about what happened and why, where we were that day, and what came next. We’ve talked about September 11 a lot this week. Along the way, I found that remembering 9/11 with intentionality gave me space to recall the gripping fear and utter disbelief of that day – before smartphones, and social media, and the rapid spread of disinformation, and hot takes shared quickly and widely and received with agreement, analysis, anger. Remembering gave space to describe for our children how fully the country came together in a rare moment of national unity, many standing in solidarity with the president that half the country did not vote for. Remembering made even clearer the chasms that have erupted in our country in the years since, all the more stark to hold up against the events of this week, and last week, and last month, and next month, in this seemingly-endless stream of violence and fury and threats and disbelief. Remembering 9/11 didn’t make me look back on that event and all that followed with rose-colored glasses; there were problems of this time, mistakes, tragedies, griefs, no question. But I found a quiet, yet familiar

resiliency rising up out of my memories – one covered with the debris of this age of rage, but paired with clarity and hope, a resiliency I pledge to carry each and every day.

Remembering does that, doesn't it? The act of remembering – either with intention or by accident – forges what David Whyte calls “a living connection between what has been, what is, and what is about to be.”¹ Past is past, of course, until it crops up with a scent long buried in grandma's quilt, or the feather falling out of the pages of the dog-eared children's book, or the biscuits and gravy we used to share with our beloved over brunch. Some memories flit through our minds and our years, skipping haphazardly through a life. Others are lost in the foggy haze of aging, just asking us and our loved ones to join the search like the woman who goes searching for her lost coin, not stopping until it is in hand.

But other memories need savoring and surfacing into our consciousness. Some need us to hold them up, studying them from every angle with every sense we have, eager to learn and be changed. Even when these memories are painful or ones we'd just as rather forget, remembering unlocks learning and growth within us. And anniversaries, I think, give us a prime opportunity to remember.

Think with me about all the anniversaries you might celebrate: anniversaries of our marriages or our work, anniversaries of graduations or moves, anniversaries of sobriety from addiction or a major disentanglement in your life, anniversaries of baptisms or friendships, anniversaries of births and death. Anniversaries remind us of where we've been, giving us space to

¹ David Whyte, “Memory,” *Consolations II: The Solace, Nourishment, and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words*, p161.

look back and take stock, while stoking both our gratitude for what's been and our hope for what's to come. In short, anniversaries help us remember.

And in a day and age that moves at lightning speed, when lessons of the past seem forgotten in the dustbins of history, when we struggle to remember even *ourselves* amidst all the demands of a life, pausing to remember fortifies us. It gifts us with reflection and renewal, often at precisely the time we need it, knitting us to each other as we mark a milestone. Anniversaries recommit us to a relationship, a community, a cause, a decision, a life, a church. Anniversaries encourage us, once again, to choose to invest in what we're remembering with gratitude.

IV.

One week from today, our church family will kick off a nine-month celebration of our 100 years in place, 100 years in this very spot at 501 West Fifth Street. Perhaps you've already started seeing signs of this celebration – an anniversary logo, invitations for a spirited lunch and nine months-worth of particular celebrations this school year. Together with God, we'll mark 100 years of discipleship and worship, of service and care, of accompanying each other through all the changing seasons of life, of tending this spot on 501 West Fifth Street that we call home. And along the way, we'll talk about why, in this screen-driven, isolated and fractured, individualized and optimized and sanitized world, communal, sacred spaces matter deeply – to us as individuals and as a collective.

Yet this is not the first anniversary we've marked this decade! Three years ago (delayed one year because of the pandemic), we observed the 150th anniversary of our church's founding, with a whole host of events and opportunities to look back and give thanks. So it's fair if you're wondering:

why do we need to celebrate the anniversary of the building when we just celebrated the anniversary of the people?

Let me take that question one step further: *why even celebrate anniversaries at all?* These are just a day on the calendar, rolling by every year in a stream of ordinary Tuesdays or busy Saturdays. Why pause? What good does it do to mark the time as meaningful in any way?

For two main reasons, I think.

First – **we mark anniversaries to tether.** With every passing year, we grow and change and move and unhook from past versions of ourselves. Past decisions and beloved ones no longer living might grow smaller in the rearview mirrors of our lives. Without the rhythm of anniversaries, it could be quite easy to keep unfolding and unpacking and unraveling, only to find ourselves so far from all we've known and unsure how we got there. And particularly in the face of the change and turmoil of this age, any human could feel unmoored and untethered by what we've long assumed about the world we've long occupied. That what was once right-side-up is now upside-down, and now not only do we have to make sense of this upside-down world, we have to live in it! Buy our groceries, and go to our doctor's appointments, and walk our dogs, and punch our timecards, and *live*. So finding the space to look back allows us to reconnect, not just with ourselves or the person we celebrate in the anniversary, but with our community – all the lightposts and guides along the way. Ultimately, remembering tethers us again and again to God, source of all life and love. So when, like the Israelites, we find ourselves in our version of "large cities that we did not build, and houses filled with goods that we did not make, and gardens full of fruit we did not plant," we will "take care that we do not forget the Lord," from whom all blessings flow.

So hear, o church! Remember!

Next – **we mark anniversaries to grow.** “There’s nothing wrong with celebrating the good things in our past,” historian Stephanie Coontz says. “But memories, like witnesses, do not always tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. We need to cross-examine them, recognizing and accepting the inconsistencies and gaps in those that make us proud and happy as well as those that cause us pain.”² I think of remembering like the woman who lost her coin, who turns over tables and shuffles papers and sweeps every darkened corner until she finds it. We become like that woman, determined to find what is lost, in the words of Lynn Casteel Harper, “plung[ing] into the tiny cracks and dark corners, rummag[ing] through forgotten spaces, upend[ing] the entire house” if need be.³ For at our best, looking back allows for clear-eyed reflection away from the crucible of the moment. When we remember, we might see things we couldn’t see before, and understand what always felt out of reach. Remembering for the sake of growth allows for hope to take root, even in places of deep despair. We see how far we’ve come, which encourages us for the road ahead.

So hear, o church! Remember!

V.

I ask you: what anniversaries are you celebrating in this season? What will you remember as you look back? How will you feel tethered to what was, and grow toward what will be? How will you love God with all your heart and soul and strength as you remember?

² Stephanie Coontz, as quoted by Brene Brown in “Nostalgia,” *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience*, p77.

³ Lynn Casteel Harper, “When I Have Dementia,” *The Kenyon Review*, <https://kenyonreview.org/kr-online-issue/2016-spring/selections/lynn-casteel-harper-656342/>

Because whether we're tethering or growing, holding fast or stretching toward, that which is at the heart, in our hands, the core beneath all the layers of memory is love. Love imbued within us by our Creator. Love shared between us as keepers of our brothers and sisters. Love offered beyond us to all who will come behind. Love that reflects its Source.

So hear, o church! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Remember!