



**VILLAGE**  
**CHURCH**  
Presbyterian (USA)

# Healing Through the Gifts of Remembering

SCRIPTURE:  
Philippians  
1: 3- 11

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Nov. 3, 2024 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

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**M**y mom, Alice Nishioka, died 12 years ago. I marvel that it has been that long. This has happened to you, too. Twelve years ago, mom died after a major stroke in Seattle. I wonder if over the years, memory changes—some memories of mom dim but some are much more clear now. They come to the forefront now for whatever reason. In recent years, what has come to my memory is the realization that my mom made a meal for us every single day. I'm second of four boys and we are all my size. And that woman, an amazing cook who loved to cook, made a meal for us every single day. This was before prepared foods appeared in grocery stores.

We didn't do takeout very much. We had a budget that we had to handle and mom was amazing at that. I do remember that there was a Saturday-morning grocery run each week, and as soon as she pulled up, our responsibility was to leave our house and all four of us would go out and get all of the groceries in. It would take several runs. And she would stand there for the next hour and a half with her long list and the receipt and she would check off and make sure that everything was accurate. I remember that.

I remember the question she received over and over again was, "What's for dinner?" "What's for dinner?" When Brandon, the youngest of us, was in middle school, mom went back to work. Even then, she'd come home after working all day and she'd confront four teenage boys and the first thing we would ask her was not "How was your day? Not "How did everything go?" The first thing we'd ask her every single day, even after we'd had a snack, "What's for dinner?" And I do not remember her getting angry about that. She was amazing.

Dad talked about how fortunate we were to have a boy mom. We never understood that because we're not the brightest of God's children. And to be honest,

this is my take on it. You mothers of boys and girls know differently, but I just don't think guys are that complicated. You need to feed us, find a place for us to sleep and then teach us to use deodorant and we're pretty much good. I do remember that we had a rule in our house: The Nishioka boys had to break one thing per day, otherwise it wasn't a day. Something had to be broken in our house every single day. Sometimes it was small things like a lamp. Other times it was bigger things like a wall. There are posters in odd places on our walls upstairs. If you move that poster, you will see a hole—a head-size hole.

I remember that after Brandon, the youngest one, moved out Mom and Dad got new carpeting, new furniture, redid the kitchen, and again, not the brightest of God's children, I came home and looked around and said, "Hey, this is really nice. How come you didn't do this when we were here?" And Mom said, "Do you not remember what it was like when you were here? You used to break one thing per day!" We were like, "Oh, yeah."

I do remember when mom would get irritated with us. Well, not with me. I was amazing. But my other brothers. She would use what I call 'punitive menu planning,' which is kind of the classic Japanese-American passive-aggressive behavior because you had to eat whatever was on your plate. That's the rule, right? So when we were making bad choices, Mom would make this lima bean and ham casserole. When we were making really bad choices, there was not a lot of ham in this lima bean and ham casserole. I remember we tried to accidentally drop lima beans on the floor and even our beagle would not go for the beans. I remember coming home and Mom would bring out the lima bean and ham casserole and Dad would say to the four of us, "What did you boys do today?" And we were like, "I don't know why she's mad! We don't know."

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I wonder if for you too, with time, some things dim in your memory and other things become even more clear? What I remember now is that my mom was faithful and loving and kind. I'm so grateful for that and that she cooked for us every single day and didn't seem to complain about it. If I have a regret, I don't remember saying 'thank you' enough to her. Over and over again.

They say that time heals all wounds. And I realize for some of us that's true. For others it's not. And for some of us in remembering—even on this remembrance day, for all the saints—some of those memories are still hard.

Two years ago, I did a memorial service for a member of our church here in this Sanctuary. The daughter, the only child, was planning with me in my office. She looked at me and said, "I just need you to know that my mother and I had a really hard relationship." I said, "I'm so sorry." Typically in the services that we do, there's a litany of thanksgiving and one of the lines in that litany says, "We thank you, O God, for all of this person, who was good and kind." And she looked at me and said, "What if I can't remember anything about my mom that was good and kind?" I looked at her and realized she was absolutely serious, and I asked her to tell me about that. And she said, "Rodger, I need you to understand all of my memories of my mother are of her criticism and mean-spiritedness. I can't recall a single time that she was kind and good with me."

I said, "I wonder if we might still say that in the hopes that there was goodness and kindness, even if you didn't experience it." And she said, "That would be okay. I'm glad for us to say that." Then I asked about other experiences of her mom and she said, "I do need to say that my mom changed when my daughter, her granddaughter, was born." I said, "In what way?" And she said, "I saw my mom become gracious and kind to her." I said, "Really?" She said, "Yes. I saw my mom share with my daughter the loving kindness that I never experienced." I said, "How did that make you feel?" And she said, "At first I was angry because I realized: You're capable of it. You just chose not to give it to me." But then she said, "With the help of a really fine therapist, I learned that I needed to acknowledge that my mother, who never showed me kindness, was showing loving kindness to my daughter—to her own granddaughter."

So, at the memorial service in the Sanctuary, her daughter got up, now a teenager, and talked with love about her grandmother. I looked over in the first pew and there she was crying and she was crying at the reception afterward. I went up to her and gave her a hug and she said, "Thank you. That was a beautiful service. Mom would've loved every moment of that service." And I said, "I saw you crying when your daughter was sharing." She said, "I think it was both love for my own daughter and thanksgiving that my daughter experienced my mother in a way I never could and I let that go into this moment."

The Apostle Paul writes to the church in Philipians, "I thank my God every time I remember you." There is a relationship between thanksgiving and remembrance. Remembering brings thanksgiving. Not always, not right away, but O Lord, I pray it comes to you in some way. I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying for you with joy in every one of my prayers because of your sharing with me in the gospel from the first day until now, and I am confident of this. The Apostle Paul writes that the God who began a good work in you will bring that work to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. That's the promise of remembering. Remembrance and thanksgiving—that the God who began a good work in all of us will bring that good work to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.

Thanksgiving and remembrance. Sometimes God reveals God's self in ways that surprise us. The Rev. Alan Smith was the senior pastor of the Second Presbyterian Church of Little Rock, Arkansas. That's the home church of the Rev. Maggie Johnson Phillips, our pastor for young adult ministry and worship arts. Alan received a diagnosis of cancer when he was serving as senior pastor there and the congregation accompanied Alan in his dying. Karen Aiken, a friend of mine, was the associate pastor at Second Presbyterian Church, Little Rock, and Karen told me it was a high privilege for her to visit with Alan and to watch him begin moving into heaven. She would sit with him by his bedside for hours at a time, and they would pray together and read. After he began to drift into a deeper sleep, she would just sit there and pray.

There were times when Alan would open his eyes and look over at Karen and he would say something, often a direction. Karen said one time he looked up, opened his eyes and said, "Karen, would you please

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go to my office and get the third book on the left from the fourth shelf above my desk and bring it to me? Would you please read chapter four?” And she was amazed. Then he would be asleep for a long time. One time he opened his eyes, turned to her and said, “Would you please call Nate? He needs to hear from you right away.” And she didn’t know who Nate was and he explained she didn’t know him. She got back to her office at the church and found his information. He had left the church a few years earlier. She discovered after he and Alan got into a fight about Alan’s leadership and she called Nate right away and said, “I’m sure you don’t know who I am, but I’m from Second Church. Alan told me I had to call you.” Nate gasped and said, “Oh, pastor, yesterday my 34-year-old daughter was diagnosed with breast cancer, stage-four breast cancer. Would you please come see us right away?” He said, “Thirty-four years ago when I held her in my arms, I promised that I would take care of her and keep her safe, and I don’t know what to do. Please come right away.”

I don’t know if you’ve experienced this, but sometimes when persons are nearing that threshold between here and heaven, a kind of a clairvoyance comes. I think it’s because God’s heart and their heart are so close together. It’s just on the verge of that moment when they will enter into the church triumphant. Alan’s memory, his remembering, brought healing not just to him, but also to Nate and his family.

There’s a point at which when we come to that threshold, when our hearts come closest to God’s heart, that we remember and we give thanks. The Apostle says, “I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy and every one of my prayers with you because you are with me from the first day until right now.” And I know this, that the God who began a good work in you, that God will bring it to completion on the day of Jesus Christ. We remember, O Lord, we remember, and we are thankful in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.