

Houghton / Sunday Nov. 11 -
Pulpit Guest: Rev. Laurie Bushbaum .

Sermon: *Marking the Heart*

Rev. Laurie Bushbaum

A few years ago, on a weekend in May, I drove from Wausau, Wi, where I was serving as the Interim minister, to Rockford, Ill. I made the trip to watch my daughter play with her college team in a national sports competition. My husband drove in from our home in Minneapolis. And her older brother made a 24-hour train journey from Boston to surprise her. Earlier that month, our son, Elliot told Alice that he wouldn't be able to come to Rockford because he was preparing to defend his thesis in ten days. He was in fact, defending his thesis the next week. But his last written draft was submitted just in time to hop a train to Chicago. And plans for the surprise began to take shape.

I picked Elliot up at the train station. While we were waiting to surprise his sister at dinnertime, Elliot was hungry, so I took him out to lunch. Just after we sat down at a table along the window, a young mother and her 3-year-old son walked by. This adorable little guy had on wildly bright tennis shoes, sunglasses shaped like stars, and a head of expansive curls. He was carrying a yellow balloon and had a red sucker in his hand – the epitome of the beauty of childhood. My son waved to the little guy as he approached. This made the boy and his mom stop. The 2 “boys” played peek-a-boo together. The little one held his sucker up to the window for show and tell; finally they gave each other a “high five” through on the glass.

As this encounter unfolded, I watched with absolute pride and fascination. When the little guy and his mom finally moved on, my son turned to me and asked, “Do you know why I did that?” Suddenly, I had this incredible feeling of déjà vu...

My son continued. “It has to do with a memory, Mom. One day, when I was about 12, we were walking back home from the ice cream shop and we passed a parent and a little kid. You stooped down and said “hello” to the child and she showed you her stuffed animal we had just bought as a gift and you made some goofy animal noises. I

was a little embarrassed.” (Tell me what 12-year-old boy ISN'T embarrassed by his mother's behavior.) My son went on to explain.

“But then you turned to me and said, **“Do you know why I did that?”** And you told me that you always greeted small children because you wanted them to know that the world could be a friendly place full of surprises.”

Sitting in a restaurant booth in Rockford, Ill, eleven years later, my 23-year-old son is recounting a memory. He remembers a conversation that impacted the way he now walks through the world. And I had no idea that he carried this memory with him.

And so, one role of memory is to teach. Memory is one way we carry wisdom and experience with us. I know that I certainly carry important lessons from family, former teachers, from friends, even from people whose paths I crossed very briefly. Of course, both good and bad memories can teach.

One of the other things that memories do is build connections and relationships. While my son told me he remembered me chatting with a little girl on a sidewalk years ago, we now added a new layer of meaning onto the first memory. I had just learned something about the power of parenting, of how what we say and do impacts our children. I know that I will remember, as long as possible, that amazing conversation in a restaurant booth in Rockford, Ill.

Please turn to RR# 649 in your grey hymnal. Let's read this beautiful poem by the author of “The Little Prince.”

In a house which becomes a home, one hands down and another takes up the heritage of mind and heart, laughter and tears, musings and deeds.

Love, like a carefully loaded ship, crosses the gulf between the generations. Therefore, we do not neglect the ceremonies of our passage: when we wed, when we die, and when we are blessed with a child;

When we depart and when we return; When we plant and when we harvest. Let us bring up our children. It is not the place of some official to hand to them their heritage.

If others impart to our children our knowledge and ideals, they will lose all of us that is wordless and full of wonder. Let us build memories in our children, lest they drag out joyless lives, lest they allow treasures to be lost because they have not been given the keys.

We live, not by things, but by the meanings of things. It is needful to transmit the passwords from generation to generation.

Memories teach, and memories build connections.

We were all excited to be in Rockford and to see Alice. She texted us the name of the restaurant where we could meet her for dessert after dinner with her team. As soon as she gave us the name, we called this restaurant and asked them to help us plan a surprise reunion of brother and sister. The hostess and waitress figured out from our description where Alice and her teammates were sitting. They told us it was safe to enter the front door without being seen. From there, we planned the moment of surprise. Now you need to know that my daughter is pretty chill. We didn't expect to get a huge reaction but still thought the surprise would be fun.

Alice was way across the large seating area with her back toward us. When her team's food came out of the kitchen, the waitress handed Alice's plate to Elliot. Approaching from behind, he came to her right side and said, "Chicken salad for Alice." She turned and looked – and looked... Fortunately her brother set her plate down, because she jumped out of her chair and threw herself into his arms. She hugged him over and over and over. Her coach and teammates looked on, having no idea what they were seeing. Michael and I came around the corner of a pillar where we had been spying and simply said, "Her brother." She had been to many of her Ultimate Frisbee games as a younger sibling and now he was there to watch her play in a national tournament.

Michael and I were quickly banished to a table nearby but Elliot was invited to pull up a chair next to Alice. My husband turned to me and said, "When we are dead and gone, they are still going to be telling that story."

What we did was make a memory. And what I hope the memory tells her, years and years later, is that we loved her; that it is important for family to show up for each other. And also, that life can be fun and full of surprises. At just that moment, Alice turned to us, gave us thumbs up and said, "Well executed; very well executed."

Some memories are carefully crafted. Families, Churches, whole cultures have rituals of memory that get re-enacted over and over. Think of all the memory vehicles in your own congregation, your traditions, patterns, and the memories that have been created here in this community. *"Love like a carefully loaded ship, crosses the gulf between the generations."*

My mother died 6 years ago, after a long decline with vascular dementia. I watched her memory slowly disappear. After several years, when she could not remember something from 5 minutes ago, she still had a few long-term memories. I came to see these last memories as her **core memories**. One of these core stories had to do with a gift that was sent to her by her great-Aunt Marie, a fascinating and independent woman in her day. Marie went on a trip, literally around the world, by herself in the late 1920's. While in China, she sent my mother a little carved, wooden Chinese trunk for her dolls. Right then, at age 5, my mother decided she would someday go to China. And she did; she and my Dad lived in the Far East for 7 years.

When nearly all other memories of my mom's were gone, she could still tell me about the little Chinese trunk. That trunk was more than a memory; it had focused my mother's dreams on a life of travel and adventure and learning about other cultures. And that's why I think it was one of last memories she carried. **It was about her sense of self in the world.**

Memories are teachers. Memories build connections and relationship. Memories locate us in time and place. And they hold our

dreams. Sometimes they also open the gate for something new to be created out of something old.

Last summer my husband and I went on a quick overnight camping trip at a State Park just an hour from our home. My family had lived in this area, a small river town, for about 6 years from the time I was 11-15 years old. My best friend in Jr. High was named Jeannie. She had an older brother named Dave and his girlfriend's name was Kiki. Well, after our camping trip we were driving home on a Sunday, stopped in town for something to eat, and were told we could find some organic food in a place called "Kiki's." Could it be? My heart started to tingle. We walked a few blocks, and entered the store. The first person I saw was a young woman who was almost a spitting image of my friend Jeannie. This must be her niece? I asked for Kiki and then out of the back room, she arrives. To make a long story short, we had a wonderful visit, got together again for lunch, and discovered that we have so much in common. She is now married to an Episcopal priest and is really very UU in spirit. With a background in theater, a few years ago she started a Festival of Lights event at the Episcopal church, and she includes faith leaders from as many traditions as she can. So, the Saturday after Thanksgiving, guess who will be the UU representative at the Festival of Lights?

Out of an old connection, from 45 years ago, I have a dear, new friendship. I followed a hunch, took a risk, and I am now re-weaving a thread from my past into my present. It is as if this old memory was sitting in me, like a little seed, and blossomed with fresh water and fresh light.

Or to harken back to our reading this morning, *History is shaped and held in so many ways that mark the heart*. Our memories are the hieroglyphics on the inner walls of our hearts. But the meanings and the messages can still change over time. As we age, we see life from new perspectives. The old stories on our walls can live again and we can write new chapters.

What core memories live in your heart? How do they teach and guide? How do they build connections and help you locate your self in the world?

Be prepared, for threads and stories from the past, may yet surprise you, and gift you, in the days to come.