First Congregational UCC
September 13, 2026
Pastor Katherine Willis Pershey
Psalm 103:1-13
"Bless the Lord"

Before we proceed, I want to note that the Hebrew word translated as fear in this Psalm reading does not have the same connotation as fear in the English language. Some translations use the word "honor" instead. When the bible talks about "fearing God," this is about reverence and humility. Not terror and dread. We are not afraid of our compassionate and loving God. And so, with a spirit of reverence, will you join me in prayer?

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

I've had a lot of conversations about memory lately. Especially the texts I exchange with my mom and my sisters. A few days ago, I broke down and asked if anyone remembered the name of my high school chemistry teacher – his name was on the tip of my tongue, and it was driving me crazy that I'd forgotten it. As it turns out the name I was almost remembering was actually the less-than-charitable nickname his students called him behind his back. Whoops. Yesterday, I woke up to a text wondering if we remembered a random 1980s made-for-TV movie musical, Rags to Riches. Heck yes, I remember it, I could probably sing along to every scene.

But many of these conversations about memory are about more than mere nostalgia. This past week many of us shared stories and read remembrances about that terrible morning 25 years ago. If you lived through September 11, 2001, where you were and what you saw that day is burned into your memory. It is one of the tragedies we vow to never forget. And yet – we all know that forgetting can be a stark and painful reality. So many of our members and friends know the challenges of memory loss and dementia, either in themselves or a loved one.

Memory matters, in small and big ways.

I remember this, and some of you might remember it too. The little girl is on the way to the supermarket to buy a loaf of bread, a container of milk, and a stick of butter. She repeats the three items to herself the whole way there, so she won't forget. A loaf of bread, a container of milk, and a stick of butter.

There's a moment when you think the stick of butter has melted from her mind, but she hears the list in her mother's voice just in time. Watching that Sesame Street cartoon is one of my earliest memories. I am not sure what it was trying to teach me, but what it did teach me was to talk to myself. Especially when I am trying to remember something.

The Psalms are the prayerbook of our sacred scriptures. These are the prayers that Jesus himself prayed. But in Psalm 103, the Psalmist is not talking to God, as we usually do when we pray. In Psalm 103, the Psalmist talks to himself – to his very soul. And like that little girl from Sesame Street, the psalmist is on a mission. The psalmist wants to bless the Lord with all that is within him. And he wants to remember who God is and what God has done.

I can almost picture the psalmist making his way down a hand-drawn street, rehearsing his treasured tune:

Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.

Bless the LORD, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits.

And there are so many benefits to remember. God forgives and heals, redeems our lives from the pit and crowns us with steadfast love and mercy. God satisfies us with goodness and renews our youth like an eagle. God works vindication and justice for the oppressed. God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

When it comes to God, there is more to recall than just bread, milk, and butter. But just as returning from the store without the essentials causes a kitchen crisis – it's a soul crisis if we forget who God is, and what God has done for us.

Years ago, the Christian writer Brennan Manning led a spiritual renewal retreat at a church in Louisiana. On the final evening, a man approached Brennan and handed him an envelope. He muttered, "I prayed about this," and walked away. Brennan was running late for dinner, so he pocketed the envelope and continued on to the parish hall. As he was getting ready for bed that night, he opened the envelope to find a check for $6,000 with a note to share it with the poor.

Six thousand dollars is a lot of money. But based on when Brennan Manning published this story, my best guess is that this happened around 1975 or so. In today's

dollars, that check would be worth more than $35,000. That's a whole lot of money. The next morning, Brennan Manning sent the entire amount to a poor man with a large family he was struggling to support. The family was in a serious financial crisis, and the sudden influx of cash was life changing. Within days, Brennan received not one, not two, not three letters from the man. He received nine thank you cards, expressing profound amazement and gratitude.

In addition to telling Brennan how the money transformed his own family's situation, the man shared how he was able to help a neighbor with the abundance.

Brennan played the role of the gift-giver in this story. But instead of basking in the borrowed light of an anonymous man's generosity, Brennan recognized that he had more in common with the poor man. He wasn't one miracle away from total financial ruin, but witnessing the man's astonishment humbled him. Everything we have, everything we are, is a gift from God. We cannot begin to calculate the value of the benefits God gives to us and yet somehow, it's remarkably easy to forget. It's remarkably easy to tell ourselves stories about our lives that deny the truth of our utter dependence on the one from whom all blessings flow.

When we forget the benefits God gives to us, we end up believing it's all up to us. But we did not give ourselves the gift of life and breath. We cannot make the sun rise or the rain fall. We cannot survive without the love and care God provides for us. We often cannot manage forgiveness – we just can't quite make it work. We're convinced that to be forgiven you have to deserve it. And our endlessly compassionate God decided that forgiveness would be extended as a matter of grace – extravagant and free and famously amazing. *You* may wake up in the middle of the night unable to stop thinking about the thing you shouldn't have said or done, but God is eagerly hurling your sin as far from you as God can. And God is a really great pitcher.

The rational response to waking up in the morning is amazement and gratitude. Even in a world that often feels all wrong. A world where friends betray friends, where people we love get frightening diagnoses, where wars rage on year after year after year, where the climate keeps changing and the artificial intelligence keeps getting more and more demonic.

The rational response to waking up in the morning is amazement and gratitude because we are all that poor man who got the 1975 equivalent of $6,000 in the mail this morning. Even on our most miserable, desperate, anxious days when everything

goes wrong. God is with us, moving and speaking, healing and providing, liberating and restoring. Not only in a distant past or far-off future, but here and now. God pours out steadfast love in the midst of chaos, compassion for our suffering, and hope when it seems like injustice will prevail.

So yes. Let's remind our souls to bless the Lord. Day after day. Let's get songs of praise stuck in our heads and sealed in our hearts, tucked away so deeply that even if our memories fail us, we'll still know the words.

But let's not forget that what matters most isn't that we remember. It's that we are remembered.

Our Lord was crucified alongside two criminals. One mocked him, saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other saw the truth. "Jesus," he said. "Remember me when you come into your Kingdom."

And it was so.

Such is the grace of God.

Alleluia. Amen.