The uses of memory are manifold. We like to travel down memory lane — set aside special days in memory, whether it be a national memorial day or a family celebration of birthdays. But have you ever considered how important memory is in the life of our religion? The older sabbath service was changed to Sunday — the Lord’s day — to remember the Savior of all, and the communion was served regularly according to the injunction, “This do in remembrance of me.” But throughout the scripture there are reminders to remember — remember how God has helped His people in the past, saved them from slavery in Egypt, starvation in the wilderness. Remember all the way, says Deuteronomy, remember all the long way that God has led you, lest you forget who it is who gives strength and life and the victory of the spirit.

Let us meditate on some of the uses of memory, especially as they relate to the life of religion. First of all, memory develops appreciations of things we may take for granted — like the new day — which the Lord has made. “Let us rejoice and be glad in it,” says the Psalmist. In Thornton Wilder’s play, OUR TOWN, there is the poignant scene of the young girl Emily reliving events long since past and realizing how much she missed in appreciation at the time. How important it is to remember and cherish the good things we take for granted: our appreciations grow and as they do, memory helps us to develop the grace of gratitude for all the good things we have enjoyed. Count your blessings, we say; remember the goodness of God in the land of the living. Giving thanks is the first act of prayer, and giving thanks is the basic meaning of the Greek word for the communion service — the Eucharist. “Eucharizein” means to think well, akin to rejoice. The Eucharist is the occasion for giving thanks to God for His creation and redemption. It is the recollection of the good things we have enjoyed that helps us to face the disappointments and pains of sorrow that are a part of life, too. It is the Psalmist in Psalm 42 who says, “O my God, my soul is cast down within me”. And then immediately adds, “Therefore I will remember Thee from the land of Jordan.” It is precisely when our souls are sunk in misery that we must say, “Therefore will I remember Thee, O God.” The Lord makes His unfailing love shine forth alike by day and night.

We must remember and give thanks in all things. This we find hard to do; we tend to be like the motto on the sundial: “I record only the sunny hours”. But as Deuteronomy reminds us, God was in the wilderness with the children of Israel in the midst of their hardships to humble them, to test them, to try their courage and faithfulness. And it is indeed good to remember the struggles, the problems, even the losses, the defeats, the embarrassments, the terrible times of failure when we said, “I thought I’d die” — but didn’t and somehow survived a stronger person, helped by some inner resource which comes from the love of God, to find even these dark times of distress occasions for growth and development. There is that marvelous story of Jacob’s ladder: Jacob lay down to sleep in the wilderness and in a dream saw a ladder stretching from earth to heaven and angels of God ascending and descending upon it. And Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I knew it not.” Surely God is to be found in so many of life’s experiences, but we are unaware. Sometimes, too, there is a real struggle with God — as
when Jacob was wrestling with an angel and was wounded in the struggle — and we are wounded in our pride, our values, our hopes; but God is in these experiences as well to bring about something better. It is good to remember these events as well. Remember all the way.

Memory, you see, develops appreciations and gratitude for life’s experiences, the bad as well as the good, for when we remember all the way and see how God is in all things, we develop a sense of faith and courage and commitment through the love of God to face life with the confidence of those who trust in God. Love endures all things; love never faileth; and with a sense of that love we can bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things. Instead of finding danger in every experience or opportunity, the courage of faith finds opportunity in every danger. It is the spirit of Paul who dared great things, did great things because, as he said, the love of Christ constrained him. This we remember in the Communion.

These are some of the uses of memory, and I am sure you can think of others and other applications. We should be aware, however, that there are some abuses of memory as well. There is, for example, the temptation to live in the past, forgetting the present, because we are caught in the past. Perhaps some vain regret, some wrong choice, some past sorrow or injury has seized the focus of our spirits. The past has passed. What its meaning really is, is to be determined by our attitude here and now. If someone has injured us, we can hold the memory and nurture its rankling poison, or we can see this in the larger perspective of a positive on-going present, and as we say, forgive and forget. As the Stoic sage counseled, if your brother has offended you, remember not that he has offended you, but that he is your brother. Everything has two handles, one of which you can carry it by. And the most terrible experiences can be refined and removed by the alchemy of a forward-looking present. It is like the King in ALICE THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS: “That was such a dreadful experience,” he said, ” that I shall never forget it as long as I live!” “Yes, you will,” answered the Queen, “unless you make a memorandum of it.” It is an abuse of memory to make memos of every injury, every dreadful experience, so we will not forget.

What of the uses of memory in the service of Communion? “This do in remembrance of me,” said Jesus. Whatever one can say is incomplete. The full meaning is caught up in one’s personal experience. But some things can be said. God is a God of history who made a covenant with His people to lead them, redeem them, a God of love to share in their trials and triumphs. That is why we should remember all the way that God has led us, all the long road we have traveled; and we must remember the new covenant celebrated by the Communion. What better evidence of a God of history than God made flesh in Jesus Christ — what better evidence of a God of creative love than the great drama of redemption on Calvary? God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son. And the mystery of the Communion is that this creative love cannot die, that whosoever believes in this redemptive love will inherit eternal life, that by the power of God, suffering is transformed, and sorrow turned to joy. But this love of God must be lived by righteousness and service in our lives as well.

“This do in remembrance of me.” This is not remembrance of some past event, but a present reality. Above all, what we remember is a new relationship to God through Christ. By the spirit
of truth, the spirit of the risen Lord, the Comforter Jesus promised, we have fellowship with God in Christ. We remember His love, we are recipients of His love, we are the beneficiaries of His sacrificial love. And we remember, too, that His love requires and inspires a responsive love in us so that we show His love in the lives our lives must touch.

“Remember all the way,” says Deuteronomy; remember all the way that God has led you, helped you, prospered you; forget not the Lord God by not keeping His commandments.

“This do in remembrance of me,” says Jesus. “Do you love me?” Jesus asked Peter. “Then feed my sheep. If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” And the commandment of Jesus is love.