

Bible Study: Pentecost 21 (A) - October 25, 2020

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

Our text from Deuteronomy marks the end of Moses' corporeal participation in the lives of the ancient Israelites. He spent much of his life being faithful to God's call, even over his own self-doubts and insecurities. He shepherded the ancient Israelites during their time in the wilderness, acting as God's emissary, even when the people were less than faithful. Moses was their deliverer, but he would not be the one who would carry his people into the Promised Land.

Still, Moses left behind Joshua, who was neither Moses' son nor brother, to take up the mantle and to fulfill the covenant that God had made with him.

One of the things I think about when I read this passage is how Moses must have felt to see the Promised Land on the other side of the Jordan, but not be able to reach it. It must have been hard to be in his position – to be so close, but unable to see the promise fulfilled.

I think it's not easy to be the driving force behind something and have to accept that you won't be able to see it through. But Moses had prepared Joshua — he had made sure that someone would continue the work he had started.

- Where might God be calling you to raise others up? Where may God be asking you to make a way, but recognize that it's not your voice that is the most important?

Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17

Psalm 90 is the only psalm attributed to Moses. When viewed through this lens, perhaps we can better feel the contours of the petition, asking when this season of trial may come to an end. The Israelites wandered in the wilderness for forty years, time for an entire generation to live and die, and for those younger to take up the mantle.

I see echoes of our current fight for civil rights, as so many of those who fought so valiantly in the 1960s and beyond are leaving us: John Lewis, C.T. Vivian, Joseph

Lowery, to name just a few. But here we are, more than 50 years later, and yet we seem to be lost in that same wilderness.

- What part of the mantle from those whose shoes aren't easy to fill are you willing to take up? What is your petition in this time of unease and uncertainty?

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

What are the best practices for building up a Christian community and a ministry of love of one's neighbor? Paul spells it out in today's epistle to the community in Thessalonica, using himself and his companions as examples.

First of all, community builders must speak boldly and with courage, according to Paul. In Philippi, Paul's message, which was spoken boldly and with courage, was met with great opposition. Speaking "truth to power," as Gandhi phrased it, is often not accepted by those who want to maintain the status quo.

Second, community builders must have integrity. In the first-century, Greco-Roman world, leaders were tested for their strength of character. A community builder who seeks after his/her own glory or personal gain can rip a community apart.

Finally, community builders are "soul-sharers," as Richard Ascough describes it in his commentary on Working Preacher. As "soul-sharers," we are called to alleviate suffering in the world, caring for the vulnerable and needy of the community, much as a nurse nurtures the children in her care. In Paul's time, it was common for the elite to have nurses, nannies, care for their children, and they would remain in close relationships into their adulthood.

"Paul calls each one of us to interact in our present Christian community with bold speech personal integrity, and soul-sharing" (Richard Ascough, Working Preacher, October 26, 2008).

- What other characteristics of a community builder would you add?
- How are the characteristics Paul describes to the Thessalonians relevant to today's church

Matthew 22:34-46

This week's passage appears at the end of a series of debates with Sadducees, lawyers, chief priest, elders scribes Pharisees and their followers. Jesus has handily

answered all questions, and finally, one of the lawyers asks: “Which commandment is the greatest?” (verse 36). Jesus responds with what Jewish people refer to as the Shema, “You shall love the Lord your god with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind.” (See also Deuteronomy 6:4-5.) It expands the first commandment found in Exodus: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3).

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” We know this as the Golden Rule. Versions of this verse are also found in Leviticus 19:18, Romans 13:9 and Galatians 5:14. This is not, eros, “erotic love,” but agape, “love” in the sense of “compassion” and “mercy.”

In her “Charter for Compassion,” Karen Armstrong points out that many religions have a version of the Golden Rule:

“Not one of you is a believer until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.” — Islam, Forty Hadith of an-Nawawi 13

“One should not behave towards others in a way which is disagreeable to oneself. This the essence of morality. All other activities are selfish desire.” — Hinduism, Ahabharata, Anunsasana Parva 113.8

Jesus affirms these two commands are foundational. David Ewart writes: “As long as we observe both commandments, we can be confident we are on that Godly path. However if we choose to ignore either love, we will soon find ourselves in a spiritual ditch.”

- Discuss what spiritual ditches you find yourself in. How might the love of God and neighbor help to dig you out?
- When we love our neighbor with agape love, loving-kindness how do we fulfill the command of loving God and can we still love God when we don't love our neighbor