

Sermon, 9 September 2007—Proper 18, Rally Sunday

Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 1; Philemon 1-20; Luke 14:25-33

After forty years of wandering in the wilderness, Moses stands on the banks of the Jordan with the people of Israel, the children and grandchildren of the Hebrew slaves that God led out of Egypt. They have never known slavery, but they have also never known stability. They have never planted or harvested crops to prepare their food; they have never cut timber or shaped brick to build their homes. They are about to enter into the land promised to their ancestors and to settle there. Rather than collect manna at dawn, they will soon cultivate irrigated fields and grind their own grain; rather than pitch their tents at evening, they will soon construct adobe walls and sleep under their own roof.

Their parents and grandparents were brought through the Red Sea on dry land, where the Lord defeated the pharaoh and the gods of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; they stood at the foot of Sinai, where the Lord spoke to them directly in the voice of thunder. But now these grandparents and parents all lie behind them, buried in thousands of graves scattered unmarked and lost across the desert. Though these elders lacked no evidence that God could provide for them, defend them, go before them, when they reached the edge of Promised Land in their own day, they recoiled in fear. Weren't the inhabitants giants? Weren't the cities all fortified? Wasn't it a land that devours those who enter it? They no sooner reached their goal, than they were petrified with terror. At the edge of what they thought they wanted, of what they believed they hoped for, of what they had crossed the desert to reach, their guts gave way, their knees went weak, and their heart failed.

Fire does not forgive. Some opportunities do not return. "How long," God asked Moses, "will this people despise me? How long will they refuse to

believe in me?” According to the Psalmist, God swore in his wrath, “They shall not enter into my rest,” which the author of the Letter to the Hebrews recalled as the cost of bad faith. Even Moses could only point across the Jordan, unable to cross into the land flowing with milk and honey, the longing of his lifetime.

So these words we hear today are heart-breakingly poignant. “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today,” Moses tells the assembly who are impatient to get on with it, whose entire upbringing has been rootlessness and restlessness, “I call heaven and earth”—what is most stable, what is most enduring—“to witness against you today”—because more than your life waits on your choice, depends on your decision, will be affected by how you swing your weight—“that I have set before you life and death; therefore choose life, loving the Lord your God, clinging fast to him, for that means life to you.”

Now, we are programmed by our culture to hear this wrong. When Moses says, “choose life,” he hardly means a single choice, signed, notarized, and filed at the Pearly Gates for future reference. Is there a day when you will decide you’ve chosen enough life and are ready to back something else? When do you anticipate you will have done just about all that God expects, so you can pick something more to your liking? There is a wonder and a horror to all this. Just because I think I’ve figured out how to love someone else, that doesn’t mean I actually have. And even if I do actually discern at least once how to act authentically and disinterestedly for another person’s good, that doesn’t mean I’m done. And even if I do learn at least how to love one person over time, that doesn’t mean I get to shake the rest off. God’s love is eternal and infinite, extended to all. “Love one another as I have loved you.” I’m afraid that if we were to take that seriously it would make for some long restless nights.

In addition, our culture programs us to hear this as an individual’s choice. This is not an individual’s choice. Moses is speaking to the entire people of

Israel. He is placing before them all a decision that they must make about how they all are to live together. He is invoking their collective commitment to each other within the Covenant that God forged, not with a single person, but with an entire people in the fire of Sinai. God's intention in delivering the Law to this chosen people is to establish a new relationship for God and humanity. Our participation in that new covenant with God is made evident by a new solidarity and faithfulness to each other, to the stranger, to the widow and orphan, to the destitute, to the neighbor that we are to love as we love ourselves. Without the community, we cannot show our willingness to be in covenant with God.

The choice to be faithful to God by being committed to each other requires more than one person also committed to witness and to receive and to correspond to our faithfulness. I cannot choose to belong by myself; you must agree that I belong, that we belong together. We choose life together. If I want to show myself faithful to God, by loving my neighbor as myself, I cannot do that alone. There must be a neighbor who consents to being loved and who loves in return, if together we are to belong inside the covenant community of God, whose commandment is that we are to love one another.

This care for each other within the design of God is what it means to choose life. If we want to show our fidelity to each other, we must support each other's life. If we want to support each other's life, we are to be guided by God's commandments. If we want to accept God's guidance, we show our fidelity to God. And if we hope to be faithful to God, the giver of life, all our choices align towards the giving of life to each other, its flourishing and strengthening and enjoyment, towards our fidelity to each other. It is Rally Sunday, the Sunday of return and commitment. It is set before you; choose life.

The American philosopher, William James, wrote a wonderful essay in 1896 entitled "The Will to Believe." In it, he claimed that certain truths,

especially those of a social and spiritual nature, need to be verified, that is, they are not true unless we act on the belief that they are true, unless we make them true. Friendship, he said, is a perfect example. Is it true that we are friends? Well, if I never act on my belief that this is true—if I never spend time with you, never ask you how you are, never expend any energy for your benefit or delight—then the truth that we are friends could be said never to have been verified. I fail to make it a truth that you or an outside observer could attest to.

We tell each other so often here that we are a loving congregation. What do we do to verify that for the stranger, the newcomer, the person who has attended only a few times...? Have we made it true for them that we are a friendly congregation, as opposed to a congregation made up of friends? It's not the same. What about those who know you worship here, but have not been here themselves? Have you verified for them, made it true for them, that this is a friendly congregation, that the friendship they would find here is not observed from the outside, but welcomed into, as if a stranger were a long-awaited guest?

“The desire of a certain kind of truth here brings about that special truth's existence,” James says; in other words, willingness to take risks for our hopes acts on what surrounds us to create verification of what is not yet. Willingness to act makes our achievements, our fellowship, our joy in each other actual and our claims about them true. Social organisms, he says, have success because their members have “precursive faith in one another.” Precursive—what a wonderful word! It means “running ahead;” the faith that I have in you “runs ahead” of the evidence and helps to bring about what I believe is true about us. Now, be careful here. James is not saying that “running ahead” causes what we hope for to happen; often we look around and find that we are quite alone in the dark and no one has come out with us. But he *is* saying that what we hope for cannot happen unless someone has precursive faith and runs ahead to where he

or she believes the others can be. Running ahead does not guarantee arrival, but everyone who arrives at a goal gets there because someone has run ahead.

We tell each other here that our ministry with our young people is important, vital, our future. The bright hope I see is the precursive faith of our youth transition team, who have picked up Dan's work and are running ahead in faith, committed to keep this ministry vital and engaged. Their precursive faith is that the congregation can continue to sustain the formation of our young people, while the discernment team and Vestry look for the best way to respond to the hope our young people have for a pastor and companion as they grow. The precursive faith of this transition team is faith in all of you: faith that as a congregation you will keep our young people in your prayers, that you will spend time with them, encourage them, involve them in our life, even in your life. Caring for our young people is another truth which you can verify. You can make it true for them, by your investment in them, that you care for them.

William James goes on to use the astounding example of a train robbery. He says, "a whole train of passengers (individually brave enough) will be looted by a few highwaymen, simply because the latter can count on one another, while each passenger fears that if he makes a movement of resistance, he will be shot before anyone else backs him up. If we believed that the whole car-full would rise at once with us, we should each severally rise, and train-robbing would never be attempted." This, of course, is also the story of the fourth hijacked flight on 9/11 six years ago, where somehow enough shared courage and purpose was found in the face of certain death to bring that plane down in a Pennsylvania field rather than let it complete its mission of destruction.

James' point, though, is that there is no limit to what you can accomplish, even in an act of self-sacrifice, when you know that others are giving as much. He makes the rather tart comment that the robbers "can count on one another,"

while “each passengers fears” that if he acts at all, he will act alone. That’s the poison: our fear, our lack of a deep utter trust in each other that we act as one, that we can count on each other. We enter stewardship drives or efforts in evangelism if they were a game of chicken: who’s going to flinch first? or who’s going to give first? or who’s going to speak first? Because if you end up out there on your own, you’re the sucker—unless you’re the one who ends up flying off the edge of the cliff. Neither one of those outcomes is a face saver. And that, of course, is the point, isn’t it? Self-preservation? Wasn’t that the purpose of the Incarnation? Isn’t that what Jesus is all about?

We don’t tell each other much at all here about our church finances, dear sisters and brothers; but William James’ train robbery example isn’t too far off the ledger sheet. When only two brave souls stand up to resist, they are quickly disposed of and tossed off the train—and the passengers are fleeced anyway. Why should any risk it? But when all stand up, when others from other cars are recruited to stand up along with them, the robbers are defeated. Is it possible to trust each other that much, to have that much confidence in what we mean to each other, what we give to and for each other, to “count on each other” as the robbers do, and to verify that truth in our budget and in our evangelism? Is it possible to believe in what we have here enough to risk offering it to another?

Can we verify, can we make it true, that, as a congregation, we choose life? Jesus made exactly this point in one of his hardest statements, “whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.” What would it be for you to leave behind, in other words, what you must leave behind any way, even your life, and choose the life of the people of God, whose thanksgiving is undying in the life of the Eternal Source, the Only-begotten Word, and the Life-giving Spirit, the one God, whom we praise this day and hope to praise forever?