



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 21
Proper 25 (A)

Descendants

[RCL] Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-46

It's a question of descendants. What are we leaving for them? Biologically related or not, there is no doubt that the decisions we make in our lifetimes impact not only the human and nonhuman creation around us now, but all those who might come after us. Sometimes, they are good things – being able to leave your children and grandchildren earthly wealth, providing young people education and opportunities you never had, passing on wisdom and experience and lessons hard-learned, knowing that the next generation of family or leadership will benefit from your work and life.

Other times, imagining the world our descendants will inherit is less hopeful: an earth ravaged by our toxic consumption, waste, and policies; institutions marred by racism and classism; in America, dwindling Social Security funds, healthcare systems that are crumbling and crashing, a massive national debt, added to massive student loans... and the list goes on. We might not climb our metaphorical Mt. Nesbo or Pisgah today and be satisfied with the vision of what the next generations might inherit when we are gone.

Perhaps Moses also had some mixed emotions as he surveyed the land his descendants would inherit. He has seen his nation, his family, through so much – liberated from enslavement, wandering through the desert, trying and failing and trying harder to be faithful to the great I AM. Like any community's leader, Moses has taken the heat, has stumbled and fallen, has made poor decisions, and has tried his very best to discern God's mission for the people of Israel.

God is well-pleased with Moses. In the end, Moses dies not from old age, and not from sickness. He is not blind and deaf and broken in the ways human bodies grow weary when they have survived so much. No, Moses dies by the command of God, a gift from God to the obedient servant. And, our story of origin specifies, Moses is even *buried* by God; the progeny of Moses does not carry out the final task as Moses' soul departs the earth, but the Creator of the universe provides this intimate and loving act to the servant leader.

And thus, the mantle of authority is passed on to Joshua. God blesses Joshua in his new responsibility and is involved in every step of the transition. And that is key: God has been involved in liberating the nation,

in leading them home, in disciplining them, and now is intimately involved in the leadership. Before, during, and after the death of Moses, God is with the nation of Israel, and will not abandon them.

Our psalm for today – the only one associated with Moses – reminds us that God is present from one generation to the next, and well beyond and well before. God has given birth to the world, and God's time is not restricted to a lifespan, only remembered by artifacts, memories, and descendants. The Psalmist uses words and phrases to remind all of us that God's eternity contrasts with human transience. It is a helpful practice to remember this, the ever-living presence of God, especially when lifespans in our current moment are shortened by illness and violence, and the world seems to crash down in its own fragility. God is beyond the human scope of time, bigger than anything we could ever imagine, *and* God cares so much about each of us that God will bless, bury, anoint, and love us.

Would that all of our nations were governed by someone who strives as hard as Moses to follow God's will! But that is exactly our Christian obligation to ourselves and to our descendants: to remember that we are someone's *ancestors* – biologically, spiritually, communally – and to base our decisions with that knowledge in mind.

In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul is trying his hardest to be a good leader, following in the footsteps of his ancestors. A spiritual descendant of Moses and a young Jew, Paul's main aim as founding father of the community is to enable the Thessalonians to lead a life worthy of God. The passage just after today's lectionary excerpt states this explicitly: "We dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, urging and encouraging you, and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory." Paul outlines a form of parenting, of Christ-like leadership, that seems impossible in every moment of real life! Reading his missive to the Thessalonians, we can only hope to live with the type of character that Paul claims to be living along with his disciples. According to his letter, Paul's leadership is pure of trickery and deceit, selfishness and greed, and full instead of honorable suffering, faith in God, gentleness, and care. Don't you wish you and every Christian you know was able to live and lead like this?

Paul's expectations may be a little high, but what is worth his words is the way he strives to teach and nurture the young followers of Christ in Thessalonica. He is raising a new generation, he is building his descendants, and therefore the descendants of Christ and of Moses. The way we treat those who are around us and come after us must be the way of God. Perhaps if we can proclaim the gospel in our words and our deeds in our lifetime, we might leave our descendants with something better than we found it.

This, one could say, is exactly what Jesus did – in a big way. Jesus was able to raise up a new generation, a new spiritual community, a new way of living that both learned from his ancestors like Moses and left a transforming power and relationship with God to those who picked up his mantle, like Paul.

Jesus' way of teaching and living and proclaiming the Good News was nothing like anyone had seen before. It was confusing, did not follow the same line as the ancestors before him had. And, perhaps not living in the way Paul would come to write about, some of the religious leaders were fed up. Our Gospel

passage, according to Matthew, comes on the Tuesday before Christ's execution. Matthew first records three of Jesus' parables, and then three of the religious leaders' riddles or trick questions of Jesus. The reading today comes during their last attempt to entrap Jesus in his own words; this is not the type of descendant they had wished for themselves!

According to rabbinic tradition, the accepted number of commandments is 613. 613! These are the laws that the religious leaders are called to follow and enforce. And yet, they ask Jesus which is the greatest, and he tells them, simply, "Love God, love your neighbor." These two commandments will change the world. In his answer, Jesus follows the rabbinic law, the laws of his ancestors; "You shall love the Lord" is part of the Shema, the basic affirmation of Jewish faith. Pirkei Avot, the ethics of the Jewish Fathers, contains a similar axiom: "The world stands on three things: on the Torah, on the service of God, and upon acts of loving-kindness." The commandments are familiar pieces of Jewish culture, teaching, and religion. But the way Jesus embodies them upends familiar expectations. "Whose son is he?" the religious leaders ask. "If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" "No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions." The religious leaders are stumped, and this is the part of the story where they begin to plot ways to remove the threat.

Despite their best attempts, those who feared Jesus' power were not able to suppress him. By being executed as a political martyr, Jesus demonstrated God's love in a way that would change his descendants forever. Today we are still calling ourselves followers of Christ. The mantle of Christ's teachings, life, responsibilities, and authority have been passed from one generation to the next over thousands of years. And in each of these lives, in yours and in mine, as it was for Moses and Joshua, God is present, and God will remain so throughout all times.

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