

Why We Do This

Sermon, August 5, 2017

Vacation Bible School Sunday

Text: Deuteronomy 6:1-9

As some of you may remember, the book of Deuteronomy was Moses' farewell address to the people he loved and cared about, people he had been on the road with for some forty years. They were now about to leave that wilderness "road" and pass on into the Promised Land, but Moses knew he wouldn't be going with them. These are his final words to them ... words he no doubt chose quite carefully, for these words would have to carry the people further into the future than Moses himself could. Many, if not all, of us parents here know something of what Moses must be feeling. You've poured your love and your lives into your children, and you know you won't be able to go with them into their future; you know there will eventually come a time when you won't be there to love, guide, love and/or teach your children any longer. So you want to teach your children well.

If you're from my generation, you might imagine Moses pulling out a guitar at this point and singing, "*You who are on the road must have a code that you can live by.*" That was the opening line of the old Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young hit "Teach Your Children" which I am not going to sing for you at this time. ("*Teach Your Children*" is from their immensely popular 1970 *Deja Vu* album ... yikes, 1970; that was 47 years ago! Thirty three years later, in 2003, the *Deja Vu* album was ranked #148 on *Rolling Stone* magazine's list of the 500 greatest albums of all time). Moses wanted to give the children of Israel a code they could live by, he wanted parents to be able to "... teach their children well."¹ Knowing he wouldn't go with them into their future, he wanted to give them the best code there is to live, and live WELL, by.

In our reading from chapter six, Moses comes to his main point: "*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.*" (emphasis added).

In other words, make sure that as your children come and go they are constantly and continually impressed and confronted and surrounded with YOUR commandment-guided living and YOUR conversation about God and His good commandments, so that it may go well for you and your future for years to come. Teach your children well. As Moses knew, there is no more important investment for the future well being of the community than the investment we make in our children. That's true for the community at large and it is especially true for the religious community. In the family of God, every one of us plays a role in that. It doesn't matter whether we are married or single, young or old ... by virtue of our promises made at the baptisms of many of these children, the responsibility of raising the kids who come to this church to live by this code belongs to us. All of us. That's why we do what we are doing this morning; that's one of the main things we are trying to do today and every day in this church.

How do we fulfill such a responsibility? How do we impress the love of God on the hearts of this next generation? How can we do that? If nothing else, we can start giving them a "code to live by" through rehearsing and repeating central truths and values, and in the process of doing that, inculcating those truths and values. In short, we purposefully steep them in our **tradition**. It's been wisely said that tradition is about the living faith of the dead, while traditional-ism is the dead faith of the living. We have no interest in the empty rehearsals of the latter. Tradition allows us to know and rehearse who we are in a world that will try to tell us so many different things. (The following excerpt was edited out on the spot during the sermon delivery, again due to time constraints, but I'll keep it here.) Exercising tradition is about living in the present rooted in timeless truths and unchanging values. This particular passage in Deuteronomy was so central, so foundational to the Hebrews because they in fact did go on to face one changing environment after the next. Eventually Jewish families began to recite these words in their homes every morning and every night; it's called the "Shema." Twice a day, every day, the family would gather and rehearse the words: "*Hear O Israel! The Lord our God is one and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your*

¹ Due to time constraints, I edited out/summarized most of the following; I include it here: "*But what he would not go on to sing were Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young's next lyrics: 'And so, become yourself, because the past is just a goodbye. Don't you ever ask them why, if they told you, you will cry. So just look at them and sigh and know they love you.'*" Moses wanted to give them a much more substantial code to live by than that of their own limited human perspective. He wanted parents to be able to do so much more than to just look at their children and 'Sigh,' never to question 'why' they do or say certain things, and just hope for the best. Moses wanted the children of Israel to live joyfully, well, responsibly and forever! Knowing he couldn't go with them into their future, he wanted to give them the best, and really, the only, code there is to live well by." -- end of edited/summarized excerpt

might." Twice a day, every home. Now, don't you think that some Jewish children rolled their eyes and said, "Ugh. Not again. This is so-oo dumb. Why do we have to do this? My Gentile friends don't have to do this." Not unlike protests some parents may hear from the back seat as they take kids to worship week after week ... "Why do we have to go there, again?" (Not to this church, of course, but I've heard about children saying this on their way to OTHER churches.) It may not make sense to them when we snap, "Because we are seeking to impress the knowledge and love of God on your hearts, so be quiet!", but that is largely what faithful rehearsal of tradition is all about (end of excerpt).

The fact of the matter is that when our children are free to leave behind our traditions, they just may. Some may leave them, for a while. But when life gets hard ... and life will get hard... they will be able to return to the knowledge and love of God *if we in the family of God have gone to the trouble of trying to impress it on their hearts in the first place.* What is heartbreaking is that so many today have grown up with no tradition. So many grow up having received no sense of identity, no core sense of who they are. They've grown up in value neutral environments, and do not even have substantial values worth rebelling against. For many, they are not in rebellion from the church; they are not in rebellion from religion. There was just nothing bound to their hearts to rebel against, because no one went to the trouble of giving it on them. We work beside and live with people like this. They do not know who they are, and they are bombarded by countless conflicting voices telling them who they should aspire to be. Young people today are just inundated with conflicting messages about who they should aspire to be. There are so many conflicting interpretations of life trying to impress themselves on them, bombarding them through television, through social media, through peer pressure ... the list of conflicting voices is countless. Unless young people can grow up knowing who they are in the grace of Jesus Christ, unless they get that message impressed on their hearts *early* on to know and love God and His good law, it will only get harder for them as they grow up and go on in life.

That's why we come back to church Sunday after Sunday, sit in these pews, and go through the traditions one more time. There is a rhyme and reason for our liturgical order; it's all just one more way of rehearsing who we are and who we aspire to be. Every worship service begins as we called to worship, coming into God's presence, acknowledging we are His people and we bow in adoration. We then confess who we are, telling the truth of our sin in the prayer of confession. We are then once again scripturally assured of our pardon in Jesus Christ, which is such good news that we just have to jump to our feet and sing glory to the Father (*actually, today we sang "Seek Ye First" instead of the Gloria Patri, because it is both also a fitting response and a familiar song to our VBS-ers ... I wish you could have had my view watching these littlest ones up here singing their hearts out as we sang one of "their" songs today!*) We then pass the joy and peace that Christ has given us around to our neighbors. So, having come into God's presence, told the truth about who we are, celebrated and shared our peace we have through the grace of Jesus Christ, we then hear the truths of God's word in song and reading and preaching and ministered in the sacraments, and all of these liturgical traditions are just different ways of saying again and again, "The Lord our God is one, the only one. And we just got to love Him with all our heart, and soul, and might." And we leave worship thinking, "That's right. That's right. Now I remember who I am."² That's our tradition. That's the gift we want to give to our children. We want to teach our children how to rehearse this identity, and they need that, because the world will take its toll unless they grow up knowing who they are, rooted in the knowledge and love of God. We want to teach them how to rehearse an identity, and to go out there to change and positively influence a dangerous world, rather than be changed and negatively influenced by it.

That's why Sunday after Sunday young parents hold little fingers and move them across the words of the hymns. That's why mothers, fathers, grandparents, young adults, high school students take a week out of their summers each year and make a fantasy land out of the church for Vacation Bible School, and why other adults throughout the year stay up Saturday nights finishing Sunday School lessons. That's why youth leaders give themselves as friends to the teenagers of this church so they can see modeled in someone's life the rubber-meets-the-road reality of belief. But let me be clear about our limitations. We can teach and rehearse the traditions, but only God can give faith. Faith that believes, really believes, that in Jesus Christ, we have been found by a gracious God Who is just determined to love us and give us His best. The real question is not, "How do we make our children believe that?" The important question is "Do we believe that?" Do we talk about, rehearse, live out our God-given faith when we are at home and when we are away, when we lie down and when we rise? If nothing else, do our children at least growing up believing that we believe? If we are concerned about the faith of the next generation, we may do best to nurture it in our selves before we try to impress it on our children.

Because the future is watching us, all of us, closer than we'll ever know.

² Also left out due to time constraints was the following: "About ten years ago I received a note from a new member who wrote: 'Please let me take this opportunity to express my most heartfelt joy and happiness attending GCCP services gives me. Each Sunday, I walk out the front doors feeling new, rejuvenated, reborn, re-energized and just plain good about the world and myself.'"