

Sermon – “Embraced”

Sunday, October 28, 2014

Scripture: Deuteronomy 34:1-12, I Thessalonian 2:1-8

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Our first scripture reading is Deuteronomy 34:1-12. It was a sad day for the Hebrew people when their leader Moses died. He had brought them through many hardships and embraced them on their journey to the Promised Land. Now it is time for Moses to be embraced by God. Moses accepted his death affirming that “in life and in death, we belong to God.” Listen for God’s Word.

*1 Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the Lord showed him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan, 2 all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, 3 the Negeb, and the Plain—that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees—as far as Zoar. 4 The Lord said to him, "This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, "I will give it to your descendants"; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there." 5 Then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord's command. 6 He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day. 7 Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated. 8 The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended. 9 Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him; and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the Lord had commanded Moses. 10 Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. 11 He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, 12 and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel. Amen.*

Our second Scripture reading is I Thessalonians 2:1-8. In Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians (probably the earliest writing of Paul), we sense a closeness and affection between Paul and his congregation. Paul talks of the importance of courage and integrity within the Apostles, however, what is as important as these is the relationship between the apostles and those they serve. The apostle is not a powerful and authoritarian figure, for Paul, as much as one who embraces God’s people, risking vulnerability so that the truth of the gospel may be made known. Paul cares for God’s people much like Moses cared for God’s people several hundred years earlier. Hear now the Word of God.

*1 You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, 2 but though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition. 3 For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, 4 but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts. 5 As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; 6 nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, 7 though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. 8 So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us. Amen.*

The title of the sermon: Embraced

*Text: So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us. 1 Thess. 2:8*

Let us pray: Holy and Loving God, we thank you that in life and in death we belong to you. May we know your embrace in all that life brings. And now, may the words of my mouth and the thoughts and meditations of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

*Reformed and always reforming...* As we celebrate Reformation Sunday this weekend and dedicate our 2015 Stewardship pledges we honor the rich history of our faith journey and those whom God has called to embrace and lead us. In the giving of our financial resources, we become a part of something larger than our individual lives and we speak to the joy and privilege of being a part of the mystery of God's kingdom in this time and place. In this tangible expression of our faith we sow seeds which have the potential of growing into branches of service and hospitality...and, perhaps most importantly, we open our hearts and minds to God's spirit by embracing our mortality and shared life within this faith community. We come into our own when we give of ourselves in ways that are sacrificial and meaningful. We come into our own when we lose those we love and when we let go of that which is beyond our control.

Three years ago I preached on the death of Moses and shared an experience on a medical mission in Columbia, South America providing pastoral care to the people in a small village near Santa Teresa who experienced the unexpected death of a young pastor who was a mentor to them. Today, my heart is saddened because we are losing one within this faith community who has become very dear to us and who is a mentor and a friend to the children and youth of Westminster.

Jacqueline Novogratz wrote a book entitled The Blue Sweater about her adventure in Africa providing micro loans to women. She wrote *Death is not hidden in Africa, but rather is woven into the fabric of everyday life*. Death is no stranger to any of us. In fact, conquering death is the heart of the good news we proclaim as Christians.

Over the years as I have experienced the death of loved ones and been present during times of loss, I find myself more uncertain of any literal understanding of the hereafter and less comfortable with descriptions of eternity that seem trite. What does give me strength, however, is the affirmation in the opening lines of the 1983 Brief Statement of Faith. IN LIFE AND IN DEATH WE BELONG TO GOD; Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps it is the simplicity of this statement, perhaps it is because of what it does not say as much as what it does say...For whatever reason, I find this affirmation powerful and as a pastor, I speak it with confidence, hope and humility during times of loss.

*In life and death we belong to God....In life and in death we are embraced by the One who knows us and loves us and welcomes us home.*

As we read about Moses' death, we can't help but feel the great loss of the Hebrew people. They had been through so much together and surely Moses had been a leader who embraced

God's people, risking his own self in vulnerability time and time again as he led them to the Promised Land, a land he would not enter himself.

When their journey began escaping slavery in Egypt, Moses brought them safely across the Red Sea. The image of the parting water has become a symbol of baptism and the beginning of each of our faith journeys. Moses led the people, like a shepherd, like a loving parent, like a thoughtful mentor, through the wilderness on their homeward journey.

However, the Hebrew people crossed the Jordan River without their beloved Moses. Surely, he was with them in spirit and it was Moses who had a part in forming them into God's people, making their crossing possible. However, they crossed over on their own and there is great symbolism in this crossing. It highlights the importance of each of us coming into our own. There are certain things in life we can only do for ourselves. By doing so we honor the mentors in our lives who have shaped our character and identity, who have led us with gentleness and strength, who have kept us accountable, who have embraced us along the way and who want nothing more than for each one of us to come into our own.

In 2011, two days after returning from the medical mission in Colombia, I traveled to the Isle of Iona, Scotland meeting my sister at O'Hare Airport in Chicago. The trip to Iona began with a nine hour flight to London followed by an hour flight to Glasgow, a four hour train ride to Oban, an hour ferry ride to Isle of Mull, a two hour bus ride across the island and a thirty minute ferry ride to Iona. A journey that began at 12 noon on Monday in St. Louis culminated at 8:30 p.m. on Tuesday in Iona. My sister and I were warmly welcomed at the Bed and Breakfast, where we were staying and greeted with some cheese and crackers and a glass of wine.

As we sat in the living room of this quaint home in a place that has a rich history of renewal, meditation and healing for Presbyterians, I began to weep unexpectedly...tears of exhaustion and relieve surely! However in the days that followed, reflecting in the silence of this holy place, I realized I was grieving the loss of two Presbyterian mentors in my life, who although they were not physically with me on my journey in Iona, I felt their presence in so many ways. These precious friends and mentors were there for me offering a healing touch on the road of ministry I traveled. They not only shared the love of God, like Moses and Paul, they shared their own selves. Their presence in my life has truly been a gift from the Holy Spirit. Their honesty, authenticity, and wise insight continue to sustain me.

Today we give thanks for those mentors in each of our lives who have embraced us, believed in us, and who have made us who we are today.

Today we give thanks for the courage and integrity of those who are willing to share their own selves with us, who are vulnerable in a way that honors our shared humanity and who offer a healing touch and a word of encouragement during our greatest struggles.

Today we give thanks that in life and in death we belong to God...the God who embraces us, who knows us and loves us...the God who sustains and strengthens us when our very lives are threatened by disease and disaster...and the God who welcomes us home when our journeys on earth are complete.

Today we give thanks! Amen.