

Sermon – “Embraced”

Sunday, October 25, 2020

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

Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, IL

Our first scripture 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 the word of the Lord.

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 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... 1 Thess. 2:8

Let us pray: Holy and Loving God, we thank you for the leaders and mentors who share themselves with us, who embrace us, and who delight in our potential. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

As we celebrate Reformation Sunday in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, which I have renamed the pan-damn-ic, we have a new appreciation for the term *reformed and always reforming*. It seems the guidelines for staying safe are changing and always changing. What is important is that we stay focused on the up-to-date science which is why we have a COVID-19 Task Force at Westminster; a team for which I am grateful, especially as we enter the flu season, see the numbers rise, and feel the impact within our congregation and staff.

In the same way that we need to remember the importance of science when dealing with illness, the Reformers of the 16th century reminded the Church of the importance of scripture when dealing with religion and faith. Two weeks ago in my “Whatever” sermon, I mentioned the Reformation cry of Soli Deo Gloria, “To God Alone be the Glory.” This was one of the five “solae” or “onlies” affirmed during the reformation. The other four are:

- 1) Sola scriptura (by scripture alone) rather than church dogma.
- 2) Sola fide (by faith alone) rather than buying salvation through indulgences.
- 3) Sola gratia (by grace alone) rather than anything we can achieve on our own...and
- 4) Solo Christus (through Christ alone) rather than through something granted by priests or popes.

As children of the reformation we acknowledge that the church even at its best is a frail and fallible human institution. Reform is the institutional counterpart of repentance. Recognizing how far short we fall from God’s intentions, we continually submit all doctrines and structures to be reformed according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit. The church is a frail and fallible pilgrim people, according to McCormick Seminary Professor - the Rev. Dr. Anna Case-Winters, a people on the way, not yet what we shall be. The church, because of who we are, remains open to always being reformed.

As we dedicate our stewardship pledges each year on Reformation Sunday, we honor the rich history of our evolving faith journey and, in a time when science beacons us to refrain from embracing, we remember those whom God has called to embrace us and has chosen to lead us in reform and spirit-led change. 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 church, frail and fallible as we are, in this time and place. In this tangible expression of our faith, we are still, we affirm the One to whom we belong in life and in death, and we embrace our mortality and the life we share 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.

As we read about Moses’ death, we can’t help but feel the great loss of the Hebrew pilgrim 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. Today we dedicate our 2021 pledges in the brass baptismal font as a symbol of the covenant to embrace each child within our Westminster family. Moses led the people, 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 patriarchs, matriarchs, and 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 and to know our full potential.

In 2011, I traveled to the Isle of Iona, Scotland with my sister Becky as part of a twelve-week sabbatical funded by a Lilly Endowment Grant. Thank God for endowments! Some Westminster members have visited Iona, and perhaps, when this pandemic is over, we can plan a pilgrimage to this holy place together. The journey that began at 12 noon on a Monday in St. Louis culminated at 8:30 p.m. on Tuesday in Iona. After 32 hours of travel, my sister and I were warmly welcomed at the Bed and Breakfast where we were staying, and greeted with cheese and crackers and a glass of wine. As we sat in the living room of this quaint home in a thin place that has a rich history of renewal, meditation, and healing for Presbyterians, I began to weep unexpectedly...tears of exhaustion and relief 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 pilgrimage to Iona, I felt their presence in so many ways.

These precious friends and mentors, the Rev. Dr. Fred Cornell and the Rev. Evelyn Fulton, were there for me on the journey of ministry I traveled offering a healing touch. 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 as I have come into my own.

Today we give thanks for those patriarchs, matriarchs, and 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 or disaster...and the God who welcomes us home when our journeys on earth are complete.

Today we give thanks! Amen.