

“Passing On”

a sermon based on

Deuteronomy 34:1-12 & 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8
with Matthew 22:34-46

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Reformation Sunday

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“If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son? No one was able to give him an answer, or from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.” (Mt 22:45-46 NRSV) So ended the Gospel passage that we just heard. Although I’m not going to spend a lot of time talking about that passage – instead looking back to those passages from Deuteronomy and 1 Thessalonians – that question Jesus asks is important. How is it that if the Messiah is the son of David, that David calls him, “Lord?”

If we recall (it was only about a minute ago when we heard this passage), the passage begins by noting that Jesus had silenced that although Jesus had already silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees thought that they could do better, and so one of them, “asked him a question.” Why? “to test him.” That’s what it said in verse thirty-five. Right?

This wasn’t a question of inquisitiveness, but an attempt to find some little flaw in his reply. It didn’t work. Then, Jesus turns the game around and asks them - these religious experts who were so busy telling everyone else how to behave – he asks them about that question about the Messiah and his relationship with David. After that no one dared to ask him any questions. Right?

Let me be clear, Jesus is okay with our questions. Jesus is okay with our yearning to grasp the good news about God’s love for every single human being that was or will ever be born, and what that means for our life. But he won’t and he can’t be outsmarted or tricked.

Danger, however, lives in that constant temptation to pick the parts of that good news that we like or which are easy. It’s a lot easier to love our neighbor (as long as they keep their yards mowed and their dogs quiet, anyway) than it is to love an enemy. Right? And yet Jesus, said, “Love your enemies and pray for those he persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.” (Mt 5:43b-44a) Then he goes on to say, “For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?... Do not even the Gentiles do the same?” (Mt 5:46, 47b) But it’s hard! Isn’t it? It is for me.

But, it’s not as hard as it used to be; and certainly not as impossible as it seems except for the faith that I have received, that’s been not only handed down to me by faithful saints of old, but passed on. There is a difference.

What’s been handed down, is mine to keep. What’s been passed on, is mine to share. Did you get that? In fact, what’s passed on holds more hope.

In that passage from Deuteronomy, we hear that Moses laid his hands upon Joshua (or Yeshua the same name as Jesus. It’s just that one we translate from Hebrew, the other from Greek.) “and that the (people) obeyed him doing as the Lord commanded Moses.” (Dt 34:9) But this wasn’t some magic moment.

Joshua had been serving with Moses since before the people even left Egypt. Moreover, he was the one who led them into the Promised Land, not Moses. Knowing that that was going to happen gave Moses hope. But these things did not happen overnight, or in an instant with the laying on of hands. Moses had been preparing Joshua for this moment, not just to hand down to him what he’d learned, but in order to pass on the authority God had given him.

This is a repeated theme in Scripture, Elijah passed on his mantle (the sign of his prophetic authority) to Elisha, not just to bless Elisha but so that the word of God might live on among the people. When people asked John the Baptist if he was the Messiah, he pointed them toward

Jesus, knowing that his own ministry would subside. Some of Jesus' first disciples left John to follow him. He was okay with that.

Likewise, when Paul writes to the church in Thessalonica, he says, "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 Th 9:8 NRSV) He does so with the intention of inspiring them to do the same, even as he looked for those among them who could carry on the work. Maybe not even just carry it on, but to do better.

Isn't that what we often say that we want for our children? That they are more successful than we? Right? Yet that requires more than just handing down what we have.

Several years ago, I was having a conversation with John, a parishioner in the church I was serving. Just looking at him, you'd never guess it, but John had been very successful and was wealthy. There weren't any airs about him. He could afford luxury cars and could give his children everything that they ever wanted. They did have more than others, but there was something else.

John told me that most wealth that passes down from one generation to the next is gone before it gets to the next generation. Why? Because although many successful parents hand down all that their children could ever want, they fail to prepare them with the skills and standards that makes success possible. Eventually, what gets handed down, gets depleted because those who receive it haven't been trained to use it. For that reason, John's kids although they had cars, didn't have high end or luxury cars, and they were expected to have jobs.

I think about that when I think of family businesses that have continued from one generation to the next. Those successes don't happen because a new generation inherits what has been handed down, but why has been passed on over the years: by working along side their parents and grandparents, and being shown how to do what needs to be done, but often with more than that. What also gets passed on is an ethic – a standard – a principle that says, "What I do, says something not only about myself, but about those who came before and what they treasured, and it's something that I want for those who come after me."

That's what we're called to do as the church. It gets muddled at times. I think those are the times and places when we see the church start to decline. Today is Reformation Sunday, when we recall that revival of faith that began about five hundred years ago. It was a response to taking faith for granted, and then like the Pharisees getting so caught up in the right things to do that the Christian life lost it's focus on loving God, but in doing things.

Then the Protestant churches experienced the same phenomenon. Then came the Great Awakening a little over two hundred and fifty years later. When we look at religion in America now, we see the same sort of decline. We're told that we need to adapt to the new order of the world if we expect revival; that we need to learn to do things in a new way. Right?

But when we look back at what was passed on by those who led revivals in the Church, we see that it wasn't about adapting the things we do to better suit the world, but a restoration of the faith that had been passed on, a faith that Jesus received and shared.

What is the greatest commandment? "To Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." Right? The second commandment follows from that to love our neighbor (and even our enemy) as ones self. Mainline Christians have been pretty

good about doing the things that show our love for our neighbors. We've handed down to them the things that they need. That's a good thing. But have we passed on the love of Jesus?

In a spirit of "accessibility" we strip our name from our agencies and charities that serve people in the world, so that people won't feel intimidated to accept what's being offered. In doing so, we keep our love for the Lord private, so that the inheritance we receive will die with us. I believe that's what happened before, and what's happening once again.

It turns us to worrying about church survival rather than passing on hope to the generations to come.

Several years ago, I took a class, "Wisdom, Worship, and Catechism" with Fr. Jack Gabig a professor at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and at Nashotah House. As modern Protestants we are sometimes suspicious about that word "catechism." It sounds "too Catholic." Yet it was Luther's catechism that helped to inspire generations of faithful.

Catechism is faith development; it's preparation for Christian life. In that context, I remember one lesson very clearly from Fr. Gabig as we discussed the things we do in worship. He said, "Everything we do in worship, teaches what we believe." So if you ever wonder, why I resist bending some things to conform to the way the world is, that's why: I need to consider what it teaches about faith.

Our hope as Christians shouldn't be that we are able to leave a legacy in which those who follow us can look back at the legacy we've left, but that we have prepared them to love the Lord so completely, that they too want others to know the love of a God who went to the cross in Jesus not as a final completion but with the intention that we would actually be capable of greater works than he.

Passing on our faith is about sharing in a new way. It's not only about handing over what we've been taught and experienced, it's about handing over those things which have given us peace to those growing in faith and preparing them to do the same.

It's not enough to prepare others for good works, any more than it is to leave an inheritance for the next generation. We must instead share the principle – the reason – that is our love for a God who so loved us that he gave his only Son so that we might have life abundant – with one another and with those whom we serve, so that they will receive the inheritance that is imperishable and eternal. AMEN