

Sunday, October 26, 2014

The Cycle of Life: LEGACY YEARS

Scripture: Deuteronomy 34: 1-12

Sermon: “Growing Well”

Are you good at delegating? You know...something that’s been your project for years and years, and yet, you can’t be the one to see it come to fruition...you have to hand it off to the young apprentice under you...to see it to completion. I have a hard time even delegating in my own house! I want control over how things go. It’s hard to leave someone else to it, and feel like it’ll get done! Or maybe, at least, to the degree and satisfaction that I’d like to see something get done.

Moses is sort of “the man” in the Old Testament. “He leads the Jews out of slavery, unleashes the Ten Plagues against Egypt, guides the freed slaves for 40 years in the wilderness, carries down the law from Mt. Sinai, and prepares the Jews to enter the land of Canaan.” He’s a big deal, main character sort of guy. Yet, in all that, and as old as he lived, he doesn’t get to cross over to the Promised Land. He barely gets a glimpse of what it will be and then he dies. But before he dies...Moses leaves something more powerful than his own feet sinking in to the ground of the land that was promised. Moses leaves a legacy—to one younger, one who has gleaned from the wisdom of Moses, and one who has been raised up to continue where Moses could not.

Moses knew he wasn’t going to get to go to the Promised Land. Earlier in the book of Deuteronomy (Chapter 31), Moses speaks to the people and shares how the LORD has already told Moses he’ll not cross over. But Joshua will. And Moses summons Joshua, and in the sight of all of Israel proclaims:

“Be strong and bold, for you are the one who will go with this people into the land that the LORD has sworn to their ancestors to give them; and you will put them in possession of it. It is the LORD who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.” Deut. 31: 7

Spoken from one who has lived such faith!

We are currently in our sermon series on “The Cycle of Life” starting with the elder years, working our way younger...leading us to Advent and the birth of Christ. Today, we focus on the legacy years! It feels appropriate, too, as we also celebrate all Saints Day! Today, we will remember those whom we’ve lost this past year. Those who have raised us up in the church, by their lives reflecting the love of Christ. We mourn them, just as we’ve read today that those who loved and cherished Moses, wept and mourned. But we hold on to a hope that’s greater than death. And we hold on to what’s been given us, by those who we’ve been graced enough to share life with. I’ve read that the “legacy you leave is the life you lead,” and so we recognize today in our church lives well-lived, and we treasure the legacy they leave and the handprints of their wisdom shared evident in our church’s life.¹ In Moses’s case, his legacy was passed down to Joshua and the Israelites...but he also passed down something that he himself would never attain! Moses has to delegate, and Moses has to trust that the one whom God has raised up, will suffice. Moses doesn’t get to go. After all that time, and strangely enough, from what we can tell near the end, Moses is okay with that.

I’ve been reading a lot about growing old, or the elderly, and our different stages of life. There seems to be a time in your life when you realize that you’ve stopped “growing up” and you consider that you are now “growing old.” Psychologists have broken us into categories! Did you know this? There is the “Young Old” those 55-74. The “Old Old” those 75-85. And the “Very Old” those 85 and older. If you’re younger than 55 and you’re an adult, you’re somewhere in all that mid-life mayhem. If you’re like my mom, who’s now 75, I don’t think she appreciates that she’s now in the “old old” spot! But here’s the thing...we are always growing! Whether it’s growing up, growing old, growing wide!, growing spiritually....our lives are always in the way of learning and growing—no matter how old we finally reach! So, I propose that no matter where we are, that we make it an intentional part of our lives to simply grow well! I am amazed at what our elderly teach us. They know and understand things that we do not, or maybe we’re too proud to admit.

I spoke at one of our Boone church United Methodist Women’s Circles the other week, and Lillian whom you heard earlier, gave the devotional for the meeting. She started out with these words, “There have been many times in my life, when I have been wrong.” That’s pretty

¹Taken from Meridian Life Design (Coaching for Life & Legacy)

powerful! Life is hard. Things happen. When I was in college, I was about to embark on my first “apartment”—life out of the dorm! Now, I just have to say, I’d like to suggest that for college kids, or single adults, and all...I think there should be “showers” given for such folks to help fill their home with all the good stuff that engaged folk get to receive upon a wedding. I had nothing! A bed and a chest of drawers. So, my wonderful mom wanted to help me out, by giving me all the stuff that she didn’t want anymore. She handed me this stainless steel mixing bowl. Stainless steel, mind you. Should hold up for some years. But, I noticed that it had a few dents in it! I was surprised and perplexed...so I asked. “Mom, I’m thankful and all that you’re giving me some stuff for my kitchen...but why are there dents in the mixing bowl?” She paused. Silent. Then finally spoke....”Um, honey, that was just a moment, you know, when I was mad at your father!” I couldn’t believe it! “You threw a mixing bowl at Dad!?” Oh, no, she said. It hit the wall! Now, I was a single young adult at the time. I had no idea what possibly could have provoked that. And, I couldn’t really understand. Now, I’ve been married awhile, have 3 children...and I can tell you, really, I’d never throw a mixing bowl at the *wall!* I’m a much better aim than that! ;) Seriously...we understand more as we age. Wisdom comes from the old...and is handed down to the young. And when we feel like we’re in situations that we can’t understand...chances are, someone older than us, does! One of my favorite things is to have friendships of people of all ages. Just this past week, I called my 76 year old friend, and we talked as long as I needed.

We need the old, the old old, and the very old. We learn from them. We take from their mistakes and experiences and they guide us in our own journeys. And we tend to think, that maybe in this life together, the old need the young, too. And when those lives intertwine together, growing well together, something beautiful, called legacy, is handed down.

There are all sorts of stereotypes on our elderly these days. But, those stereotypes are getting shattered. My pastor friend has a 91 year old parishioner who’s still running marathons. Harriet Thompson. Bless her. In my friends’ words...”she’s a force of nature!” She broke 2 records at, get this, the Rock ‘n’ Roll Marathon this year. She was the oldest to compete, breaking the record for her age bracket: 90-94! She’s a cancer survivor and ran her first marathon at age...76! She’s raised over \$90,000 for leukemia. You heard our own Lillian Parks, who is 90,

share her testimony today! Those “over the hill” birthday cards at age 50 just aren’t cutting it anymore. We’re making greater strides in our 90’s these days! Pioneers, they are!

That still doesn’t mean it’s easy. Just because you’re “retired” doesn’t mean you’re going to play golf all day...forever! Patricia Beattie Jung writes about the aged facing lots of problems, “from managing their own spouse’s chronic illness, to facing the grief caused by the death of loved ones, to the loss of job-related relationships, loss of mobility, increasing dependence,”...and on.² We look in the mirror, and sometimes we don’t recognize the bodies we now have. They look different. We feel different. Yet, it’s still us!

I’ve got to tell a story on Miss Lillian. I was visiting my parishioner at the time, Mr. Clyde Cole...who is 98. And lo and behold, when I got there, his good friend Lillian was already visiting with him. I thought I was doing a pastoral visit, but really, I just had the pleasure of listening in on their own conversations! They reminded me they couldn’t hear me well, and just smiled as I talked. And then they got to telling me what it was like being old! Let me demonstrate this...it’s too funny...because they actually demonstrated it for me, too! (They said, “Your body doesn’t always make all the connections that your mind is trying to do! For example...you want to go to the kitchen...so the first half of your body turns to go, but the legs stayed put! So, you have to physically sort of help the legs turn along with the rest of your body, to go where you planned on it going in the first place!”) I looked at them like they were crazy...and they busted out laughing! They were cracking each other up. I couldn’t understand at all...but they said, “one day, you will!” I hope I erupt in such laughter with my friends, when I’m in my 90’s, as we reminisce on life together.

Moses was old. He was Old Old. In fact, he was VERY Old. Telford Work in his commentary on Deuteronomy, reminds us that “heeding God’s command to ascend and die at the threshold of his people’s homeland may be Moses’s most difficult task.” Moses’s most climatic act as a prophet of Israel, ‘is to walk the covenant’s talk!’³

Moses was faithful, and wise. And he passed that legacy on to Joshua. In v. 9 of the passage you heard today, it reads:

² Jung, Patricia Beattie. “Growing Old In Christ.”

³ Deuteronomy Commentary on the Bible, by Telford Work.

“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.”

Joshua was FULL of the spirit of wisdom...because MOSES laid his hands on him. Moses testified early in Chapter 31 it would be Joshua. Moses confirms it WILL be Joshua. And Joshua was filled with the spirit of wisdom...because of Moses and the legacy and power of hope that he passed down to Joshua. But, did you catch this...Moses did this, as commanded by the LORD to do so. Wisdom doesn't just come from our own well-intended actions. Wisdom comes from hearts that seek after a faithful God, the One who leads us, commands us, and prepares us to follow him. Moses was a follower of God. And that is the greatest legacy one could leave.

Take a look at this great photo. My colleague Rev. Paul Thompson shared this favorite photo this past week. He writes that it's of his mom and his grandson. Says William is a 1 year old, and his mom is well, older than that! I love so much how Paul describes this picture taken at the beach. He writes,

“As William is just beginning to walk, my mom is holding him up. You can see his focus is on the massive body of water ahead. Her attention is fully focused on him. Here they are, at two very different places in their lives, playing an extremely important role for each other.”

He explains that for young William, the future seems limitless. For his mother, she has the “benefit of years of experience,” but also some limitations. “She is into preserving what she has and is not into wasting any resource she has.” These two work together, interacting and connecting, and reminding one another of perspective on life. They need each other. The grandmother's life is nearer to the end. But, she sees in her young grandson, such hope for what lies ahead. Even if she can't go there with him, she's a significant part of the journey!

Here's the thing. Scripture says that Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mt. Nebo, to the top of Pisgah! And the Lord “showed him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, the Negeb, and the Plain—that is the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees—as far as Zoar.” The commentator writes that from Dan (at the Mediterranean) all the way to Zoar—they are not actually all visible

from Pisgah. “If Moses sees them, YHWH must be showing him a vision perceptible only with eyes of hope.” So, if he can’t really see it all, then why go all that way to the top? Why not stay settled below and just hear it from God? “Because hope sees through the visible to the invisible. It is not blind faith or obvious inference but insight grounded in experience.” We take the walk to the top of the mountain...even in our oldest of age, as old as Moses was even...grounded in experience as we walk along the way...literally walking the walk of the talk we profess! We see with eyes of Hope....sometimes that’s through the eyes of the wise, sometimes it’s through the eyes of a child, sometimes it’s through the eyes of the church, and those who carry on after we’re gone. Sometimes it’s through the eyes of our own faith. We are a people of faith in a mighty God. And we may not be the ones to cross to what we’re heading towards, but we can see with eyes of hope that it will happen. And we know that we’re in this walk together. And we rejoice.

This passage today is full of wonder and hope! Joshua is handed a legacy by Moses. Scholars proclaim that “From his birth to his death, Moses’s whole life has been a great sign and wonder of salvation. His towering legacy leaves Israel in the position only to remember and reflect upon what has happened in its sight.” Watching, waiting, and reflecting. Our lives become a mirror of those Israelites who have gone before us. No one knows where Moses was buried. No monument can be posted there. No attention can be given. Only the legacy of the Torah and its people. Symbolizing to us here today that “the church can rest anywhere, because it hopes in the ‘communion of saints, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.’”⁴ Amen.

⁴ Work, Telford. Deuteronomy Commentary