

Sermon October 29, 2017

Living Long, Loving Forever Cara B. Hochhalter

Deuteronomy 34:1-12 and Matthew 22:34-40

We spent Monday night in NYC to celebrate our daughter's birthday and found a good deal at the Empire Hotel by Lincoln Center... we found out later much to our amazement, that my grandmother's brother Herbert DuPuy, had owned and built this hotel! It was remodeled in 2007 from the way it was in 1922. The new style is supposed to be "50's kitsch" --- but Jeff has another name for it. It was a little overwhelming. As the elevator doors opened to our floor...we were faced with a long hallway covered in unusual wallpaper; from ceiling to floor were hundreds of different sized picture frames... in cream and maroon colors with black spaces where any image would be. It looked like a fun house as we walked through this hallway of frames... What a shame we couldn't see the original décor from the days of my ancestor.

Let us be in prayer: Gracious God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

For this sermon today, I want you to imagine 3 different framed pictures. In the first frame, imagine a picture of Moses about to cross into the promised land. The cover of the bulletin might help you imagine the landscape even though this is not the actual place. What a poignant part of the story though, as Moses, who led the Israelites to freedom from a life of slavery through all kinds of trials, finally comes to the land they had all dreamed of and prayed for...and God tells Moses that he may not cross over to it. At 120 years old, Moses has come to the end of his life and on the plains of Moab he stands looking over to the other side of the Jordan just there in the beyond. It says his eyesight was still keen, so you can imagine his longing, so close yet yet his was another kind of journey to take.

The Israelites mourned in this place for 30 days, remembering Moses and all that he did for them and the miracles that played out from his deep relationship with God. His successor, Joshua, a man "full of the spirit of wisdom" leads the people on. This story makes me feel that no matter what, our stories do go on...maybe with new leaders and new generations...but this wonderful movement of people seeking a better way...of people loving into the future...this will go on....

I just listened to an interview with Atul Gawande, who wrote the popular book, "Being Mortal." Gawande is a surgeon who works in Boston, and discovered something beautiful in dealing with people who were in their last chapters of their lives. Instead of focusing on one treatment after another...one of the questions Gawande asks his

patients is, "What would a good day look like for you?" He tells the story of a woman who in her last days said she always wanted to take her grandchildren to DisneyWorld...he said if he had known earlier, they could have made that happen for her...What would a good day look like for you?

I am sure that Moses would have loved to cross over the Jordan with his people but Gawande says that the more we realize that we are links in a whole chain of life that goes beyond our own....then it somehow makes death more acceptable. We are links in a whole chain of life that goes beyond our own...and isn't that a little bit hopeful?

The next framed picture I want you to imagine is the two great commandments, perhaps they are carved in stone in your mind. Jesus told us these are the ones to remember, although he heard them first in the Hebrew Scriptures of Deuteronomy and Leviticus before the New Testament was written. When tested by the Pharisees to say which commandment was the most important, Jesus said to FIRST love God with everything we've got.... And SECOND: to love our neighbors as ourselves. These are huge. How it impacts our lives when we try to live this way; loving God and loving others, as we also care for ourselves.

These great commandments put us into a place where we are not the central one...a place where we become part of something much larger...a link in a much, much larger chain....and that is beautiful.

Now the third picture frame I want you to imagine is a scene from church history that took place in the 1517, exactly 500 years ago on October 31st. Martin Luther, a German monk, supposedly nailed the 95 theses on the door of the castle church in Wittenberg. His actions brought about a split with the Catholic church and the emergence of Protestant Christianity.

In a snapshot, and I'm really not sure how much of this is legend...Martin Luther grew up abused and forced to beg for his food. A benefactor befriended him when she heard him sing beautifully in church! She realized he had the potential to become a scholar so he moved into their home. He studied so hard, he became ill and nearly died but believed God saved him for a greater purpose. Then again when lightning struck near his feet and knocked him over he told God that if his life was spared, he would become a monk...and so he did!

But Luther was a tortured soul...talk about being "hard on yourself"...he struggled with what he perceived were deep flaws in his character and faith...he spent hours at

confession. Luther was rescued from this turmoil by a vicar general named Johann Staupitz who told him he had to believe in God's forgiveness and that it came out of love, that he did not need to WIN God's favor but that God's love was with him all along.

At the age of 27 Luther was sent to Rome but he was disillusioned with what he found. The monks were living like princes instead of the simple life he had known in his monastery and they did not seem to follow any monastic rules. The Pope had moved to France and Rome seemed to be falling apart. Luther was appalled at the religious hypocrisy.

He went to the steps at Scala Sancta, brought by Helena, Constantine's mother who said they were the very stairs upon which Jesus faced Pilate. Pilgrims climbed these stairs on their knees in repentance. While Luther knelt his way up, these words flashed into his mind, "The just shall live by faith." (Romans 1:17) He returned to Germany and became a professor at the University of Wittenberg, teaching the Bible and preaching. He taught about faith, grace and an enduring love of God.

But a fund-raising campaign for a brand-new basilica in Rome pushed Luther to revolt. Pope Julius II wanted to replace the decaying St. Peter's to build the second largest church in the world. After Julius died, Pope Leo X followed. He was part of the Medici family of bankers and kings. To raise money for the building project, the church began to sell indulgences; charging people for a paper saying they would get into heaven quicker. Sound absurd? The people were even urged to buy these indulgences for relatives who had passed before them, buying their way into heaven! This little jingle was to inspire them: "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs!" It was surely a money-making scam in the name of the church and Luther was appalled!

On Oct. 31, the eve of All Saints' Day, he pounded 95 theses on the door of castle church in Wittenberg when he knew there would be a big crowd. He also sent a letter that was forwarded to Pope Leo saying this whole business of selling indulgences was nowhere to be found in the Gospel... and that Luther could be silent no more!

The Pope said he was drunk and would feel better when he sobered up! He ordered Luther to recant his statements against the Catholic church but Luther refused and finally was excommunicated. His books were burned but his message continued to spur a division in the church.

With Luther's influence and the invention of the printing press, Christians were able to read the Bible for themselves and then came the development of the Lutheran denomination and other Protestant churches, Methodists, Congregationalists, Baptists and Presbyterians. Our United Church of Christ grew out of the Congregational Church.

So we recognize Martin Luther today on the 500th anniversary of his efforts to reform the church. The Catholic Church also made great changes. Today there are wonderful movements towards reconciliation between Catholics, Protestants.. and Jews. Luther was human and in his later years, embarked on a terrible hypocrisy of his own. Although he started out in sympathy of the treatment of Jewish people, he believed he must convert them to Christianity. When they did not want to give up their own interpretations of scripture and faith practices, Luther became extremely anti-Semitic, even calling for the destruction of synagogues, schools and homes. Shamefully, some of his later writings were used to justify the actions of the Nazis during the Holocaust.

Rather than hide from the truths of our history, we can learn and move forward. We can move beyond the barriers of creeds and prejudices to recognize our own gifts and mistakes. We can celebrate differences and know that God is truly large...that the love of an infinite God dwells in each human being and in creation, too. We are links in a long chain throughout history and part of a faith story that calls us to move forward...always finding ways to love more fully, forgive more abundantly, and profess the love of God in the ways we live.

And so let us look at your framed images...the great Moses, ending his days there on Mt. Nebo after leading his people to freedom, the two great commandments to love God and others...including yourself, and Martin Luther of the 16th century in Germany, who calls us out of the greed that interferes with living the Gospel....

May we find hope in these pictures of our faith..... Amen.