

The Unfinished Legacy

Deuteronomy 34: 1-10 2 Corinthians 9: 5-15

With few exceptions, we're old here. I discovered last week at a training that Regions Bank considers anyone age 60 or over to be an "elder." At 62, that means that I'm "elderly." I'm not sure what that says about the rest of you who think that I'm **not** that old. For sure, it's become my go-to excuse for anything I screw up – "Give me a break; I'm elderly." It isn't that I deny it; a few hours of working yesterday at the clean-up revealed me to be bone-tired, useless-for-the-rest-of-the-day elderly. I'm not quite to the point of finding a trip to Publix to be the big item on my calendar that leaves me craving a nap kind of elderly, although I can see how that could happen.

Getting that label is a reminder that you're older than a whole lot of people, most of whom not only *seem* to be younger; they *are* younger. I see the dates of birth of many of my customers, and I'm amazed at just how old I am. Before I start sounding like Tom Moseley, let me just add that I notice that the obituaries feature more and more people in my age range.

Clearly, the best years are in the rear view mirror. Those would be the days when you'd work outside all day long – sun-up to sundown – and then go out and throw back a few brewskies with the guys *before* calling it a day. Or you'd go out with the kids and do something as a family all day, and then be ready to do it *all over again* the next day. No more. On my busiest days, I'm unplugged from everything before 9pm. On a normal day, I'm done at dinnertime. It's a good rule for keeping boundaries, but lately I realize that I haven't got much left at night anyway.

But none of this means that we can't get plenty done in our days, be contributors, and even maintain a vision for what we can do with our lives in our elder years.

Yet clearly, there are limits that we face. Some are imposed by nature, condition, and quality of our lives. But there is one condition to which all who undertake something substantial and meaningful must get reconciled. It is the unfinished legacy.

The lectionary provided a perfect text for this, which was something we discussed in Sunday School last week. In Deuteronomy 34, we're in the final chapter of the story of God's people in the wilderness. You'll recall last week how Moses had separation anxiety about bringing the people to the last leg of their journey before the Promised Land, worried that God was not going to send Moses with some assistance. God had been there for him all along, and as we discovered, Moses not only needed God to be with him, it seems that God needed to be with Moses.

Here in chapter 34, the journey is complete. Moses is taken to the mountaintop once again. God shows Moses the Promised Land spread out before him. God says: *This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.* We can imagine the joy that Moses must have felt at seeing the goal of their long and arduous journey, from the terror of fleeing Egypt to the travails and suffering of wandering for years in the

wilderness. This moment is what he has been waiting for. The Promised Land; there it is. You made it, Moses, you and your pain-in-the-tuckus people have done it. The journey is over and now the taking and settling of the land can begin. The vision of this people of Abraham having their own land, their own place, given by God, is what Moses had worked for throughout the greater part of his lifetime. It is so close now.

But then God drops the other shoe: *I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.* What? What do you mean Moses gets to see it but not go there? Wait, that's not fair, is it?

Then the Deuteronomic editor, who has no sense of tact, simply says: *Then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there.* The text pretty much states that Moses saw the Promised Land, and then he died. This terse expression of Moses' fate actually tells us a lot about life's vision and fulfillment.

Quoted in our Sunday School lesson was one of the pillar theologians of the last century, Reinhold Neibuhr, who said:

Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love.

Neibuhr reminds us of the scope of life that extends far beyond whatever efforts we might commit to a task. There is no completion if the work that we're involved in is truly substantial.

We can rake leaves, gather moss, and pile up branches, and know that there could be another storm – not even a storm but a strong wind – before this month is over that drops down more leaves, more moss, and more branches. Those who feed the hungry are not going to end hunger. Those who advocate for food relief for hungry families are going to see hunger truly eradicated. We act in hope that our efforts have an impact, make some small difference, contribute in some meaningful way to a continuum of efforts that strive in their own way to give witness to compassion, to justice, to peace, to equity, and to community. But hope is what binds the efforts of your individual contribution with the offerings of countless others who are doing something, too. And it isn't just happening in our lifetimes, but preceded us and continues long after we're gone. We aren't the Savior, and the big healing that we may desire may never be seen by us.

Like for Moses, the fulfillment of the freeing of God's people would come in their receiving the Promised Land. But it was not going to happen in his lifetime. Pursuing the vision of God for his people, he did whatever he could, acting faithfully to bring them to the threshold of their next campaign. But he would not see his people settle that land, prosper in it, or see them divide amid corruption and injustice, or anything else that has all been the history of this ancient people.

Like Moses, we're made aware that there are always great things we can set out to do. We may not complete the task, but few tasks – indeed, maybe no great task – finds its completion ever. That's when Neibuhr reminds us of faith. Once again, those words were: *Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith.* Again, the continuum of events suggests the futility of our little efforts as more leaves, more moss, and more branches fall to the ground. But faith binds the whole together so that all contributions, however small, join in the process, in the flow that feeds the promise of new life.

Finally, Neibuhr recognizes that the great symphony of contributions is no individual effort, not due to one person. The advancement of the Kingdom comes from the cloud of witnesses that come through the ages and who are coming after us. In our united work, we share in the harvest that cannot be seen, indeed hardly imaginable. But the inspiration is there nonetheless, regardless of how clouded the vision may be by the current context. That last line in Neibuhr's quote once again: *Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love.*

Lastly, we have to remember the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as he preached on the night before his assassination: *We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop... And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight... Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.*

The apostle Paul lived on the edge during his ministry. He was constantly getting himself into trouble with somebody. The scripture is from 2nd Corinthians. At this point, Paul is expecting to return to Jerusalem. He has set a challenge before the communities of faith that he has started. It involves taking up a collection for the ministry in Jerusalem. Paul knows that relations with the Jesus movement leaders in Jerusalem have not been too good. The Jerusalem folks have always had a faction that took issue with his ministry with the Gentiles. A collection from his churches for their church and ministry would be a gesture of considerable goodwill, and Paul can use all of the goodwill he can get. Corinth is one of his stops along the journey across or around the Mediterranean to Jerusalem.

Here, Paul is exhorting them in the matter of this special collection. In this narrow context, he also speaks to the greater question of what we do with our lives, how we remain stewards who are faithful and purposeful, seeking to do ministry in every season in the name of Jesus.

Paul uses the image of the sower. The sower who sows sparingly, reaps sparingly, while the sower who sows generously, reaps generously. Paul reminds them that God has been generous to them, and does wonders when they give faithfully, saying: *God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.*

By the way, this passage and others in this section may sound a bit similar to the “prosperity gospel” that gets heard in TV ministries and others, that if you give, then God will reward you in kind. That is **not** what Paul is saying. Listen again: *so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.*

In other words, there is a life-changing spirit of giving and generosity flowing from faithfulness to the promise of new life in you. It is a witness to *the harvest of your righteousness* which comes in an expression of thanksgiving to God for all of the blessings one enjoys. It is far more than mere charity, but a faithful witness of thanksgiving for God’s providence to you.

Paul sees the Corinthians and the others in his new communities of faith as seed bearers. The amount of seed they bear is directly proportionate to the level of blessings they see in their lives. They should understand the abundance and generosity of their God, and the grace of the promise of new life in Jesus. The celebration of that abundance comes when the seed is sown generously. The seed can be sown abundantly because the sower knows that abundance comes from God and God will bless the generosity by using those gifts for the work of building the Kingdom. It is **not** to be sown generously because God will give the sower more as a reward. God is interested in the kingdom, not your investment account. The sower for the Kingdom wants God’s will to be fulfilled. That’s all, and that’s enough.

But the sower also has to be reconciled in knowing that the fruits of your planting may not become visible in your time, or the harvest from your sowing get reaped in your time. We sow; God harvests. We sow in faith, in hope, and in love, acting faithfully and knowing that we have sown blessings from what we’ve received. We’ve shared in the promise of new life and become witnesses to its spirit, to our Savior.

Our legacy, whatever it is, will be unfinished. It is our faithfulness that has us participating in the work of building the Kingdom, even though we may not see what the fruits of the harvest are. We sow in faithfulness because that’s the way God has placed the word in the world, sown in abundance, so that those who sow throughout their lives may know the abundance of a loving and gracious God, impacting many lives with the goodness of our Savior.

May we never stop sowing, no matter our age, our energy, or our resources, but do all things to serve the Lord and his Kingdom of new life for all.