

OCT. 25TH SERMON: FAITHFUL OR NOT?

Moses, so faithful, so stalwart, does not get to enter the Promised Land. After all he endured, confronting Pharaoh, 40 years in the wilderness, grumbling people, idolatry, receiving the commandments, seeing God, the list goes on, he does not set one foot in the land God swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Seems unfair, don't you think? And yet, this year, when I read this familiar account of the Lord and Moses on Mt. Nebo, I get a sense of relief. Somehow, this difficult year of so much tumult and pain, I feel as if Moses might see the vast expanse of land and think, "Whew, the next part of this journey is Joshua's responsibility, not mine." Moses, we are told, was 120 and not fading in vigor; perhaps the idea of passing the baton to Joshua felt right and good. The focus of our unfaithfulness is not success or a benchmark, but God. When we recognize this truth, our relationship to the One who calls us takes priority over the outcome of our efforts.

Hence, Paul can be bold to declare the gospel in the midst of much conflict hostile to the good news of Jesus of Nazareth. Approved by God and entrusted with the gospel, we are to speak not to please human beings, but to please our God. Outcome does not determine human actions. God's call and our commitment to the One who calls us moves us forward whether we enter the Promised Land, only to see it on the horizon or remain in the wilderness another 40 years.

We attempt to love God and neighbor because we are commanded to do so, not because we expect our neighbor to respond in kind or thank us, or be transformed by our love. This exchange in Matthew between the lawyer and Jesus reveals the limits of rhetorical debates. Those who wish to test Jesus know the

answers to the questions they pose. They want only to trip Jesus up and get him arrested. They are all about intended outcome, manipulated results, feigned insincerity. Jesus, on the other hand, is all about embodied love and ongoing relationship---with God, with others, with creation. Jesus asks a question of his own about whose son is the Christ---knowing the answer, but silencing his critics at least for a while. Jesus is the Messiah, the very one to be loved and followed, but those religious authorities cannot recognize him given how tied they are to an outcome that favors them and secures their power.

We must not be too hard on those lawyers and leaders who come to test Jesus, who want to silence him at all costs, who are fixated with an outcome of their own making rather than a relationship with the divine that will take them places they may well not want to go with people they would rather not acknowledge. We, too, protect our own interests, relish success, yearn for particular outcomes that makes us look good and bolster our security and power. We do this in the church, as well. We count and measure, compare and set goals. This, of course, has value when it helps keep us accountable to loving God and neighbor, proclaiming the good news and making disciples, but it becomes idolatrous when it becomes an end in itself, divorced from focusing on and following Jesus.

There is a beautiful devotional from Teresa of Avila:

"Let nothing disturb you,

Let nothing frighten you,

All things are passing away:

God never changes.

Patience obtains all things

Whoever has God lacks nothing;

God alone suffices."

This is a very soothing statement, but at the same time, in the midst of things that must be done and not all that holy, I am attempting to be faithful to God's call and the Spirit's leading. Even so, it is easy to get caught up in outcomes, in the desire to be successful, to make it to the finish line and point to people safely led across it. I want tangible evidence of work well done. And sometimes, I get that evidence. Or at least I think I do, but who is to say, in the end, what bears good fruit in the long run. I suspect much of what I judge to be a good outcome may well fade and have no lasting impact, and some of what has felt like utter failure God may use to bring others closer to the Christ.

This year may be a good year to let go, as much as we are able, of outcome, of getting to the finish line, entering some promised place and declaring victory. This may be a very good year to focus closely on our relationships with God and one another, to do our best to love God and neighbor with all we have on any given day, to seek to please God and no one else. We are in the wilderness still and I am not sure if I can see the end just yet. I know I'd like to get a glimpse of the other side of this long season, but meanwhile it would be good to be gentle with everyone, with ourselves, as lovingly gentle as a mother taking care of her children, because we are all dear to God. There is so much we do not know and cannot know about what the outcome of this year, our efforts and our perceived success and failures will be. We can, however, be certain that God never changes. God alone suffices, God has called and sent us. God loves us and will not leave us. And God calls us to love and serve---always.

Amen and Amen!

