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Proper 17B
Peace, Seattle
September 2, 2018
Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

THE LAST LECTURE

Our first lesson today has a "last lecture" kind of feel to it, don't you think?
There's Moses, poised with the children of Israel on the edge of the Promised Land. He knows he's not going to get there personally, but his people will, and he has one last thing he wants to tell them. It goes on for 34 chapters.

The "Cliff Notes" version of those 34 chapters is found in our verses today, and it contains the same mixture of tenderness and admonition that's being shared all around the country this time of year as parents send their young adults off into the world, "by paths untrodden, through perils unknown," a journey that will take them away from the relationships and rhythms they've known, away from home.

This leave-taking can be a scary time—particularly for parents! Even as it's an exhilarating time for the young adult leaving home! Mom and Dad have said it all and said it often.

- They've done their best to teach their kids how to carry themselves in the world.
- They've shared advice, given lectures, and issued warnings;
- They've cared for wounds of both the physical and the emotional kind.
- And now it's time to send them off.

But before they do, there's one thing more to say. Is it something they haven't already said? No, it's the same old message. But they can't resist saying it.

REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE. REMEMBER WHERE YOU CAME FROM.
REMEMBER YOU ARE LOVED.

It's this kind of sentiment that frames the book of Deuteronomy.

The New Testament quotes Deuteronomy more often than almost any other Old Testament book. And the song beneath the words is: This is your story, will you adhere to it? This is your story, will you stake your lives on it?

This story teaches us that human beings succeed best in community when there's a clear framework and set of boundaries within which to live. Moses' job, as God's mouthpiece, has been to communicate that framework and those boundaries.

Ironically, clearer boundaries give us greater freedom.

- For when boundaries are clear, we don't have to wonder who we are—we know.
- When boundaries are clear we don't have to wonder what's expected—we know.
- When boundaries are clear we don't have to ask what's right and wrong or what our responsibilities are to God and neighbor—we know.

As the Hebrew children prepare to leave Moses' sphere of influence, he reminds them that the story their parents and grandparents lived—the story that took them from captivity to freedom and kept them in God's wilderness school for 40 years—is part of them. The good, the bad, and the ugly.

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The missteps, the stumbles, the penchant for losing heart and for having a wandering eye when it comes to trusting God—this whole history with all its proclivities won't magically disappear when they cross the Jordan. Like the desert dust that lines their lungs, it will cling to them.

And so Moses' message to the people, God's message to them, is: STAY CLOSE TO ME…

God is forever inviting us to stay close, not unlike when we insist that little ones stay close and hold our hands when we cross the street. We don't do it because we simply like rules; we do it because we love our children and want them to survive amid life's dangers and challenges. By keeping them close we are teaching them how to be safe.

Later on they'll learn about when and under what circumstances they should apply the principles that underlie our admonitions about safety, but for now, we want them to learn to trust and follow.

And even when, as they mature, the time comes for them to leave home, even then we want them to stay close to the values with which we raised them, and the relationships that will endure.

Now some of you young people are rolling your eyes right now, as you think about the failure of your parents to live up to the very standards they want you to live by! I get that contradiction.
The truth is, we parents are works in progress, too. But our own failure to fully embody what we teach, doesn't mean those standards and values we espouse aren't worth holding up. Be patient with us…

(1) Everything I've been saying up 'till now illustrates the first point of the statutes and ordinances given by God to the people through Moses. They're not ends in themselves, but rather a structure, a pathway set out with love, in which life can be discovered and can flourish.[1]

(2) The second thing Moses wants his people and us to remember is that we stay closest to God when we mind our relationships with our neighbors.

The first in a series of readings from the book of James this morning says much the same thing: Faith that isn't embodied, that isn't put into practice, that doesn't have legs, that issues in speech but not in conduct, is worthless. There can be no "closer walk with thee" without simultaneously paying attention to the vulnerable ones in our midst.

James reminds us that the nuts and bolts of our everyday interactions and decisions matter—for when all the parts are assembled together they become the scaffolding on which community and social order are built.[2]

That scaffolding is under pressure these days. Public speech and conduct are in the limelight—and not in a good way. James knew that words create worlds and his observations about the power of words—especially to sow disorder—are hyper relevant for today.

The speech we use, the way we identify and speak with and about each other matters.

[1] D. Cameron Murchison. *Feasting on the Word, Proper 17.* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012) Walter Brueggemann quote: *"All through the book of Deuteronomy the tradition is at pains to hold together holy presence and social practice, for either alone is inadequate and will not grasp the attention of the nations."*
[2] Archie Smith Jr. *Feasting on the Word*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) p. 14.

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I was never been a great fan of John McCain's politics, but I am a fan of John McCain the man.

One of the stories that's made the rounds this last week—a story that speaks of the power speech has to detonate or to defuse, to be respectful or to be self-serving—is the story of what happened during a town hall meeting in Lakeville, Minnesota, during the 2008 presidential campaign.

At the height of the conspiracy movement that claimed Barak Obama was not a natural-born American citizen, a woman in the audience tells McCain she can't trust Obama. HE'S AN ARAB, she says.

But McCain won't take the bait. NO MA'AM, he says, HE'S A DECENT FAMILY MAN AND CITIZEN, WHOM I JUST HAPPEN TO HAVE DISAGREEMENTS WITH ON FUNDAMENTAL ISSUES.[3]

The way we speak about each other matters. It matters in this House of Worship, it matters at home, it matters at work, and it matters in the public square. Destructive words, words that demean or trash others can never "be the means for illuminating God's presence or making room for divine goodness in our lives."

To stay near to God is to hold spirituality and ethics, holy presence and public behavior together. [4]

(3) Finally, the last point Moses drives home in these verses from Deuteronomy is this:
God's teaching, God's Torah, is not meant to benefit Israel alone.
It's meant to be a luminescent, a shining example to other peoples and other nations.

YOU MUST OBSERVE THIS TEACHING DILIGENTLY FOR THE SAKE OF OTHER NATIONS, says Moses, WHO, UPON SEEING YOU PUT IT INTO PRACTICE, WILL SAY "SURELY THIS GREAT NATION IS A WISE AND DISCERNING PEOPLE!"

Moses invites his people to remember that the story they're part of is not just about them.
The promise, going all the way back to Abraham and Sarah, is:
IN YOU ALL THE FAMILIES OF THE EARTH WILL BE BLESSED.[5]

Jesus will later say it this way: YOU ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD. A CITY ON A HILL CANNOT BE HID. LET YOUR LIGHT SHINE BEFORE OTHERS SO THAT THEY MAY SEE YOUR GOOD WORKS AND GIVE GLORY TO YOUR FATHER IN HEAVEN.

In today's gospel, as Jesus goes toe-to-toe with the guardians of tradition, the presenting issue is TABLE MANNERS. But beneath that issue is the question: **Who gets access to God?**

Jesus answers by saying, it's not the formal rules of table fellowship that matter, but rather how we meet and treat one another—whatever our status or background—as persons beloved by God.

"There is a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea" goes the hymn.
God's sphere of concern is broader; God's desire to connect runs deeper than our own.

Some scholars think that it was largely Jesus' eating habits and table manners that brought about his eventual downfall. It's not surprising, then, that among his followers, the abiding presence of the crucified and risen Jesus came to be celebrated in the Table ritual of a new kind of meal.

[3] https://abc7chicago.com/politics/hes-a-decent-family-man-the-moment-mccain-defended-obama/4058948/
[4] Ibid.
[5] Genesis 12:3

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A meal in which people of all ages, genders, races, ethnicities, and social classes sat together and ate; and in that eating, found themselves in the presence of their crucified and risen Lord.[6]

This is the meal we gather around today. A meal to which all are welcomed; a meal through which Christ offers himself again and again, that we might share in his abundant life.

In, with, and under the bread and wine he offers forgiveness and healing, and the invitation to be his body in the world. As we take in his gifts they become part of us, transforming us.

And we, in turn, share his abundant life with sisters, brothers, neighbors, co-workers, strangers, enemies, friends.

Amen.

[6] Gail Ramshaw, *New Proclamation*, 2003, p. 164