

Sermon

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St. John the Evangelist

October 29<sup>th</sup>, 2017

Pentecost 21 (Proper 25 A): Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17; 1 Thess 2:1-8; Matt 22:34-46

When I was younger one of my favorite movies was “Homeward Bound: The Incredible Journey.” Do you know this movie? It’s about two dogs and a cat who through some mix up get separated from their family and have to travel across the entire country to find them. It was a live action movie with real animals playing the parts and actors doing their voices. They had various adventures and close calls along their incredible journey and I don’t remember all the details, but the scene that sticks in my mind is the last one where, after weeks of traveling through the wilderness, the pets somehow find their way to their family’s home and they come running through the back yard for a jubilant reunion with their beloved owners. Heroic music swells, there are smiles and tears and hugs and big slobbery kisses and the credits begin to roll.

That’s how it should have gone. That’s how it should have gone for Moses. Well, maybe not the slobbery kisses, but that’s the kind of Hollywood ending he deserved. But that’s not how it went down. Frankly, I couldn’t believe this was how Moses’ story ended the first time I read through the Bible. Moses, whom God called out of a quiet life of shepherding, to lead a rebellion against the tyrannical Egyptians; whose whole rallying cry was based around delivering the people of Israel out of slavery and returning them to the Promised Land, who had to endure 40 years of wandering in the desert before he got there—40 hard years with little water and little food—leading a belligerent people and following a temperamental God; avoiding countless tribes and peoples set on their destruction, now, finally walks to the top of Mt. Nebo and looks out over the entire Promised Land. The land flowing with milk and honey; the land sworn to his forefathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; a land now right in front of him, that he should be the one to walk in and claim. That’s how the story should end. But instead Moses gets to look out over the land and God says, “I’ve let you see it, but it is not for you to enter in to, it is for your descendants. Your work is done. You have played your part and it is time for you to exit the stage.”

Are you kidding me? This is like if those two dogs and a cat made it all the way to within sight of their home only to drop dead before making it into their owners’ arms. How ridiculous! How unsatisfying! How unfair! How...true...how true to life...especially the life of faith.

You see the truth is, living faithfully means engaging in work that will not be completed in our lifetime. And that can often feel unfair and frustrating. We want to be the ones who taste the fruits of our labor, to celebrate the rewards of our work. That’s how it’s supposed to go. But if we take Jesus at his word, and the two greatest things we should focus on in our life are loving God with all our heart, soul and mind and loving our neighbor as ourselves, the truth is those commandments take more than a lifetime to fulfill. We can live our whole lives following God’s laws, doing good things, and when we die there will still be work left to do.

This understanding, the understanding that the work of changing ourselves and our world through the Gospel of Christ was going to be a long-term project, is one of the things, I think, that

motivated Paul to write all those letters. He was desperate to extend the good news to as many people as possible for as long as he could, even after his death. Like Moses, he worked tirelessly to spread his message, but he died before he got to taste the fruits of his labor. He had only small, tenuous victories (like in Thessalonica) as a reward for his life of suffering and hard work. Most of his preaching didn't take; many of the churches he formed faded away. There is no way, given the state of things when he died, that he could have imagined what the Church would become after his death. But that did not stop him from playing his part with full-hearted zeal and commitment.

I became a priest because I long, with my whole being, for a world of love and justice, a world where people truly love God with all their heart, soul and mind, and their neighbors as themselves, a world that I believe is what God's Kingdom looks like. That kind of vision inspires me. It gives my life meaning and purpose and makes me excited to go to work each day. But I know that when I die there will still be wars raging, there will still be people dying of hunger, and sleeping on the streets, there will still be greed and evil and hatred preventing all people from living a full life. And, I know that my own faith will remain incomplete; that I will die with doubts and questions and fears. The cathedral of God's Kingdom will only be half finished in me and in the world; the Promised Land will remain in sight but out of reach. Sometimes this is disheartening, disheartening enough to give up trying.

When I find myself disheartened by the unending work of the life of faith, there are a few things I find helpful. First of all, it's helpful to have a clear idea of what exactly the particular part is that God has called me to play. Don't make the mistake of thinking that Priests are the only ones trying to make this world more loving and just. Each and every one of us has a unique part to contribute to the long-term project of bringing this world more in line with God's Kingdom. Shepherding was not Moses' calling, so God gave him his real role, the role of liberator and prophet, and he played it with all he had. What is the role God has given you that will help you and others love God and neighbor more fully? I can give you a hint: it's not savior of the world (that role is taken), but it's not passive bystander either. Find that role, and once you do, play that part with everything you've got.

Another thing I find helpful is to remember that this is not individual work. We have institutions, organizations that—knowing that the work of creating a world of love and justice is going to take more time than we've got—promise to continue to equip people to pick up that flag of faithfulness and march it forward. That's something the church can do. One of its great strengths is its longevity. Paul knew the power of organizations to outlast individuals, that's why he worked so hard trying to establish communities of people that could pass on the faith as long as it was necessary. And it is still necessary. When I feel overwhelmed by the work of bending the world towards God's vision for it, I fall back on the Church and trust it, trust you all, to help. Because the Church will still be here, fighting the good fight, long after we are gone.

But the most important thing we need is hope. Reinhold Niebuhr, the 20<sup>th</sup> century American theologian, once wrote, "Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime, therefore we must be saved by hope." He's right. It is a great privilege to be engaged in a project that will stretch beyond our years on this planet. Yet even such worthwhile work can seem overwhelming or unfair when measured on such a grand scale. That's when we need to be saved by hope. Hope that the work I do, the work we do will have in some way moved us a little closer to God than we were before. It was an unshakeable hope, stemming from a deep and abiding faith in God, that allowed Moses, and Paul to give their life's work to something they knew they would leave unfinished. And that unfinished work, the

work of loving God and loving our neighbor completely, has been handed on to us, and we in turn will have to hand it on to those after us and trust God to help them do the same.

Friends, the work of living a faithful life is rich, beautiful, important work. In our lives, we can do a lot to develop our relationship with God, heart, mind and soul, and we can do a lot to help make this world better: more loving, more just, even if that does not mean it will yet be a just and loving world. But we're not going to finish it. We play but a single role in a multi-character drama that began before us and will continue after we exit. Therefore, we must trust, we must hope. For, the future is not ours, only the present is. And it is our calling, our privilege, our responsibility, to shape a future we will not see. It's not fair. It's not easy. It's not always satisfying. But as St. Paul said "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ." Amen.