

Gratitude in the Place of Disappointment

Deuteronomy 34:1-5

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Editorial regarding the sermon and the current Israeli/Palestinian conflict - Seeing the text from Deuteronomy this morning you may be expecting another sermon about the current situation in the Middle East. Last week I did change my focus to address these current events, reminding us that the value of human life is greater than wealth, land or allegiances to leader or country because we all bear the image of God. If you missed that sermon, it is available on the www.eastchurchGR.org website.

These texts were chosen months ago from the lectionary in keeping with my series on Gratitude. This is from a resource called “A Preacher’s Guide to Sermon Series; thematic plans for lectionary years A, B and C”, by Jessica Miller Kelley and Brian Erickson. This morning’s text is the final in our series on Gratitude. I believe God has a broader message for us to receive from today’s reading that may speak to world events but is also a strong message for us as a congregation. I hope and pray your ears are open to hear and receive a word from God today. Let us pray.

“The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” This quote, often attributed to Martin Luther King Jr, is based on a longer passage from a sermon by Rev. Theodore Parker published in 1853. Rev. Parker was an abolitionist and Unitarian Preacher in Massachusetts. Here is the original statement from his sermon,

“I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. But from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.”

These are words spoken by someone who, like Moses in today's reading, is gazing into the future, beyond their days and wondering did my life's purpose accomplish anything? Will those who follow me carry on and complete the work that I have started? What kind of legacy am I leaving behind? Will my dream come to reality one day?

Throughout one's life we face many hard decisions, random choices and of course many mistakes and turns of fortune that shift the course of our lives. We may find as we age a mounting list of regrets and "what ifs" in life that make us wonder how our lives may have been different if only this or that had not happened.

In today's reading we find Moses is on top of a mountain gazing into the Promised Land knowing that he will not enter it. He could be filled with great regret and shame for the mistakes he made. He could be angry with God for harshly denying him this one, final reward for his lifelong calling to lead the children of Israel to this land. He could also be dreading whether Joshua and the other new leaders will be competent enough to carry on the work without him.

These are common thoughts that many of us face as we grow older. Throughout life there are many times when life choices or the unexpected turns of fate change the direction of life. Yet we cannot help but wonder what if. What if I had turned left instead of right. What if I had accepted that promotion or job in another state? What if I had not been in that car accident or if I hadn't been in the wrong place at the wrong time, how would my life be different?

These questions, although common, can often rob us of gratitude. Dwelling on them too long and too deeply can cause one to regret the life that you have and feel trapped dreaming what could have been. Gratitude helps us to look at where we are today and find the best of what life has become. In so doing we may discover where God has been at work through us even in those difficult times of life, to lead us to where we are today. Upon such reflection, we may realize a deeper purpose for our lives by God's

leading. In so doing we may also catch a glimpse of where it may go from here. Such insight is best attained through prayer and gratitude.

You may recall Moses' purpose in the beginning of Exodus, was to liberate the people from bondage and lead them back to the land of Canaan. Looking back now at the end of his life, Moses can see how God used these past forty years in the desert to raise up a people of the covenant and of the law, committed to God. The greatest accomplishment for Moses was not the land, but the law and the foundations of a new society for the people. Throughout history the fixation on the land has become a place of constant contention, while the teaching of the law found in the Torah continues to inform our work to seek justice and righteousness even beyond the Jewish faith.

Moses could have been full of that same regret for the poor choices he and the people made that barred him from entering the Promised Land. Yet the book of Deuteronomy shows Moses singing songs of praise to God for his life. Moses also offers words of encouragement to the people as part of his farewell address as they receive new leaders who will lead them forward. He has come to a point in his life where he fully embraces the way things have turned out. He is grateful for the final blessing of looking into the future as the people move forward without him. In the end he was able to trust that, although he could not see beyond the horizon, God was at work and that the moral arc of history would continue to bend toward justice.

To be honest, the people that Moses led into the desert are not the same people that stood before him now. This is a new generation that has only known the nomadic life of the desert. These are the children of the people Moses led out of Egypt. They are ready to fulfill the dreams and promises of their parents as they come to the land. More importantly they are the people of the covenant.

They were new people about to face a new way of being in the world with new challenges. They could not rely on the old ways of living in the desert to best address the new challenges and ways of being in the world going forward. They needed a new leader that could grow with them and lead them confidently.

Yesterday, at the Annual meeting of the Michigan Conference, this was a question that Claire Bamberg, our keynote speaker, raised for us. She reminded us that during the pandemic, while we were locked down, the world changed, and we changed. There is no “back to normal” to return to and if we are honest with all that we are facing in the world today, normal was not working for many of us even back then. So as faithful people of God we need to discern our purpose for today’s changing world. The question is not how can we regain what we lost, but how can we listen and discern where God is calling us now. That work begins when we seek to answer this question: **“How do we respond to God’s call to be the church in a hurting world.”**

Discerning the answer to this question is the work that East Church and many churches are facing today. It is not the work of one person or leader, it is the work of us collectively coming together with hearts of gratitude for where we have been and who we are now, as we look to the horizon to discern where God is calling us to. This is a collective process of asking God to reveal to us as a community how we should respond to God’s call to be the church in our hurting world today.

As we continue with our stewardship campaign, I invite you support the work of East Church not just with your pledges, but also with your input and commitment to come together as a faithful community called here to discern the will of God for us as one body in Christ. We have a diverse congregation both young and old, new and long-time members, conservative, liberal and progressive views of faith and ideology, all manner of gender, orientation and ethnic identity. These are some of the ways division in the past has been defined. But it can no longer be us vs. them attitudes but we, the members of East Church together listening to one another and God.

Will you join me on the mountain top and ask God to show us what part of the arc of history East Church is being called to help bend toward Justice to ease the suffering of a hurting world. Will you join with one another to discern how we can be the Church that Christ needs today. Let us lift up prayers of gratitude for all that God has done and is still doing through us today. As we prayerfully look to the light of Christ.