

Committed to the Win-Win

October 25, 2020

Deuteronomy 34: 1-12

¹ Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the LORD showed him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan, ² all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, ³ the Negeb, and the Plain—that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees — as far as Zoar. ⁴ The LORD said to him, "This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants'; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there." ⁵ Then Moses, the servant of the LORD, died there in the land of Moab, at the LORD's command. ⁶ He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day. ⁷ Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated. ⁸ The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended.

⁹ Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him; and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the LORD had commanded Moses. ¹⁰ Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face. ¹¹ He was unequaled for all the signs and wonders that the LORD sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, ¹² and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.

Matthew 22: 34-46

³⁴ When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵ and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him.

³⁶ "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" ³⁷ He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' ³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

⁴¹ Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: ⁴² "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." ⁴³ He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, ⁴⁴ 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet"'? ⁴⁵ If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" ⁴⁶ No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

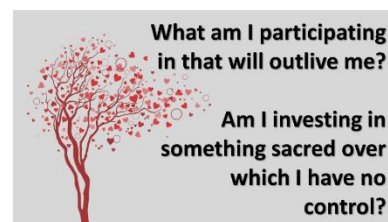


Today we conclude our "Thriving" sermon series. We have looked at the aim or mission of the church and considered how we build a foundation of faith that

allows us to lead into that mission. Last week I touched on the idea that our approach to generosity defines who we are and whose we are. This week we extend this idea as look at good stewardship as a practice that brings joy and better allows us to love God and neighbor. As we prepare to do so, let us pray...

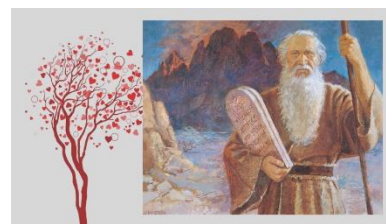
Last week our passage from earlier in Matthew 22, the religious leaders presented Jesus with what is known as a “false dilemma”. False dilemmas oversimplify complicated issues by offering only two possible solutions. They asked Jesus, *“Is it right to pay taxes to the emperor?”* The religious leaders wanted a yes/no answer. But Jesus saw a greater possibility and answered accordingly. Economists and game theorists call false dilemmas “zero-sum games” – there is one winner and one loser; combined their score adds up to zero. A simple example would be checkers. The winner is +1 and the loser is -1. Together their score is zero. Zero-sum games are competitive, they involve winners and losers. The religious leaders were playing a zero-sum game with Jesus. There could only be one winner. There had to be a loser. They sought to prove that he was not the Messiah. In the end, eliminating him became easier than proving that he was not the Messiah. They did not see the possibility of their relationship with Jesus as being a win-win situation. Some people choose to view life this way. Living with such a mentality leads to an ‘eat or be eaten’ lifestyle. It is a painful and lonely way to live. It is selfish and inwardly focused.

Many of us spend our earthly life striving to gain earthly reward – promotions, raises, prestige, self-satisfaction, popularity. We want to see and taste and feel the results. We get stuck on the treadmill, we want instant gratification, now! When we fall into this ‘eat or be eaten’ mentality, when we get stuck on the treadmill of keeping up with our neighbors, we fail to think about these two big questions: *What am I participating in that will outlive me? Am I investing in something sacred over which I have no control?*



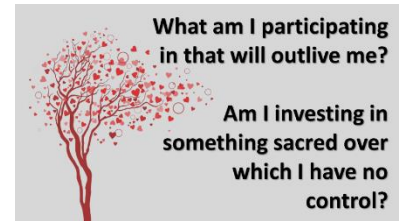
How counter-intuitive these questions seem when seen through the world's eyes! But as Christians, these should be questions that we spend some time considering.

In our passage from Deuteronomy we find an example of one who lived into these bigger questions. Turn with me to Deuteronomy 34 as we look at the end of Moses' story and at the beginning of Joshua's story. The final chapter of Deuteronomy covers the death of Moses and the transition of leadership to Joshua. The passage begins with Moses climbing to the top Mount Nebo. From the mountaintop, God reveals the Promised Land that the Israelites will soon inhabit. It is the land long ago promised to Abraham and then Isaac and then Jacob. Moses is able to see the land, but God will not allow him to cross over the Jordan River, the boundary to the land that they will inherit. Back in Exodus 32, when he saw the golden calf and the people worshipping it, Moses' anger got the best of him, leading him to smash the stone tablets in frustration with that "stiff-necked" people that we spoke of two weeks ago. In verses five and six from today's passage, we read that Moses died and was buried *"there in the land of Moab"*. It feels so un-ceremonial, so unimportant.



Now, if Moses was a zero-sum guy, he would have protested, he would have fought to live longer. Maybe he would have tried to wheel and deal with God, to buy a few more years, to at least get to step into the Promised Land. Moses went before Pharaoh, the most powerful man on earth, to demand his people's freedom. He led them out of slavery, ending 400 years in bondage.

He spent forty years leading and teaching God's people in the wilderness. But for Moses, this whole adventure was not about him. His life had been enough. In his heart, he knew the answer to these two questions. He had faithfully accomplished the task that God had given him, and he was at ease allowing Joshua to lead the Israelites on their journey into the Promised Land.



Moses saw the completion of his work and the passing of the mantle to Joshua as a win-win situation. In the closing verses we read, *"Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face"*. The passage speaks of the wonders and miracles, of the *'terrifying displays of power'* that Moses had performed. What would allow a man like this to gracefully pass on leadership and to quietly accept death instead of marching triumphantly into the Promised Land? He knew the answer to these questions.



Moses did his best as the leader, but really had no control over what the people did or did not do. Moses' greatest contribution to the story of Israel is not getting them to the brink of the Promised Land, it is his humble participation in the larger life of faith and of the community, in that central and divine story of God. Moses gave fully of himself. God blessed him with the gift of leadership and Moses was generous in using his gift to lead the people to freedom. Moses became part of God's plan and became a part of the community of faith. He did not stand outside of the community, but he lived and practiced his faith within the larger community. Moses set the example and helped others to live faithfully in their relationship with God. That was his legacy.

This is how the community of faith continues to work today – each of us are part of the greater whole, our gifts and talents working together for a greater good.

This week I was reminded in a TED talk about the organic community found in nature. These trees with the white bark are aspen trees.

Aspens are usually found among dense pine forests, as shown in this picture. I learned that aspen trees have a root system that connects one tree to another to



another. Because of their root system, these trees live in a connected manner, helping each other to survive and to grow, instead of competing with one another. I also learned that aspens are generally found in large colonies, often derived from a single seedling. The roots can spread one hundred feet or more from the original seedling. While each tree lives between forty and 150 years, there are root systems alive today that have been alive for thousands of years. Moses was a tree, a giant in the community of faith, who lived for 120 years. Moses was part of something more, though. Many years later, the root system of faith sent up a shoot in Bethlehem. Soon thereafter this man began to preach and teach, to heal and to redeem, to reveal what a life lived in obedience to God looked like. This man is the focus of our second passage for this morning.




Turn with me to Matthew 22, verse 34, as we begin to look at a Jesus' life – a life committed to living for and into the community of faith. In this morning's passage,

the Pharisees take their swing at Jesus. Jesus, in turn, also takes a swing at the Pharisees. As their interaction begins, the Pharisees ask Jesus an open-ended


question: *"Teacher, which commandment is the law is the greatest?"* Much like last week's question about paying taxes, this too is a loaded question. It is an answer that the youngest Jewish child could answer. To the Jews, these words from Deuteronomy 6:5 that Jesus will quote would be like John 3:16 is to devout Christians today. By this time, there were over 600 laws that instructed the Jews on how to obediently live out their faith. In an article this week, I read this about said religious leaders: *"The Pharisees had a reputation for adding all sorts of man-made laws on top of God's law, allowing them to be judge and jury over the people. As the enforcer of these rules, the Pharisees were in the position of power and control"* (Michael J, Kruger). While there were many commandments to pick from, to the Pharisees and other religious leaders, there was only one correct answer.

Jesus hits the nail on the head: *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind"*. As heads were probably nodding in agreement and with deep appreciation, Jesus continues. In verse 39 he adds, *"You shall love your neighbor as yourself"*. The nodding heads of the religious leaders

probably became still. Here is where Jesus' ministry and their ministry revealed a deep divide. Jesus' ministry often focused on those outside the typical religious structures – those living on the edges, those on the outside, those who were not "clean", those who did not have it all together. Even in John Wesley's day, which was not too long ago, the church was not a place for these kinds of people. The poor, the downtrodden, the illiterate and uneducated, the imprisoned – they were not welcome in the Church of England that John Wesley served as a pastor.



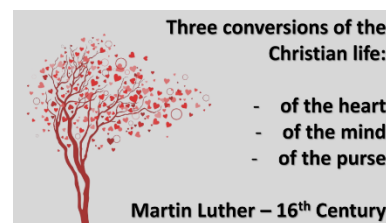
"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength".



"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength".

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself".

Martin Luther, the sixteenth century priest who began the Reformation, noted that three conversions are necessary in the Christian life: “conversion of the heart, of the mind, and of the purse”. I believe Luther is correct in his order. Wesley did too. The movement towards generosity is one of the last developments on our spiritual journey. We all first come to know who God and Jesus are in our heart as we learn the faith of our families. We next come to understand how our faith is personal, affecting the decisions and choices that we make in our mind. The last thing we often surrender is the control of our finances. Perhaps the ultimate story to illustrate this is the story of the widow’s mite. In this story from Mark 12, Jesus was sitting in the temple observing the offerings being put into the temple treasury. The wealthy are depositing large sums, making a great clanking noise as their offerings fall into the treasury. Then along comes a poor widow who deposits two small coins – so small that they do not even make a sound as they land in the box. Jesus notes that this widow *“has put in more than all those who are contributing”*. To unsort the disciples’ confusion, Jesus says, *“she, out of her poverty, put in everything she had”*. It was a gift of great extravagance and deep trust.

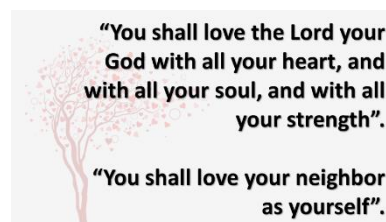
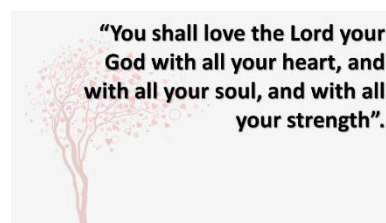


From this passage we can learn how Jesus had a different way of counting the offering. Jesus counted it:

- a) Based not on the difference it made in the treasury but on the difference it made in the giver’s life.
- b) Based not on the other offerings but on the capacity of the giver.

Those that gave "*out of their abundance*" never felt it. It did not make a dent in the way they lived or in the ways that they used their resources. The widow, in her own life and in her practices, had clearly experienced all three conversions of the Christian life. The widow gave trusting that God would provide for her needs.

Returning to our gospel passage for today, we tie all of this together. The first commandment that Jesus names parallels Martin Luther's three conversions of the Christian life. Jesus quotes from the Deuteronomy passage that uses the words heart, soul, and strength; Luther uses heart, mind, and purse. Oddly enough, of the two, this first commandment is the one that the world struggles with the most. Even those in the secular world can make sense of "*love your neighbor as yourself*" and can put it into practice on a fairly regular basis. Here, in the second great commandment, Jesus and Luther and Wesley meet. All three saw how the "churches" of their day were excluding many people. All three had a heart for those in need of healing, wholeness, salvation. All three felt a passion to draw all people into the community of faith.



As churches, together we are rooted and grounded in the larger ecosystem of God's life – part of a larger network working together to build the kingdom here on earth. Our church is in partnership with all other churches and with many parachurch organizations seeking to share the light and love of Christ with a world in need. As individuals, we are also each part of that connection as well.

Like the many roots that connect the aspen grove together, Jesus Christ is the common “root” for all who love and serve the Lord. As churches and as individuals we are all part of the same work. Yes, in some ways, Grace has its own little niche here in Piedmont and in the valley. While many in the larger world ‘make sense’ of the commandment to love our neighbors, again, most struggle with the first commandment – the commandment to love God with all that we are. This commandment leaves little room for self. At its most basic level, I believe this is why many struggle with the first great commandment. Because of this, our unique task as people of faith is to help others explore the first commandment – to *“love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind”*. Our first means of teaching this is by the way we practice the commandment in the living out of our own lives.



This morning, we will consecrate our gifts to God and the church for the ministry to be done in 2021. For each of us, our gift is much like the widow’s offering – it has been covered in prayer and it rests upon our trust in God. As we prepare to do this, I would like to share a story from last Sunday. Many of us will bring forth gifts that are financial. Some will bring forth gifts of time and/or talents. Each of these is given as an act of faith. Those that stand or sit up here on Sunday morning, each offers their musical gifts to help us worship the Lord our God. Last Sunday during one of the songs, I heard a descant floating under the words of the chorus. It was quiet but very beautiful. Perhaps some of you heard it too. Later, I thanked her for the wonderful gift that her voice and Spirit-led words were to that song and to our worship.

Now, for the rest of the story. That particular song had been quite challenging to her Thursday night at practice. She could not find the notes. Jolene shared that she lifted up a little prayer just before we sang the song Sunday morning. Using her words, *"HE helped me pull it off. God is always good"*. With a trust in the Lord, she was willing to offer what she could, allowing God to work in and through her to bring God the glory. As we prepare to come forward and to lay our gifts down for the work of ministry in 2021, may we do so with the same trusting spirit. As we do so, to God be the glory! Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. Where is your "growing edge" of faith – heart, mind, or purse?
Where do you hope that God leads you to experience more growth?
- 2) *Pray*. The work of ministry in 2021 is a couple of months away. Pray for discernment about where God might be calling you to a new thing.
- 3) *Study*. Read Mark 12: 41-44. What other lessons can you apply to your giving practices from the widow in this passage?