

What Shall We Tell the Children?

A Sermon Preached by the
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Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
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Deuteronomy 6:4-9
Matthew 5:13-16

The reading from Deuteronomy this morning is known as the *Shema*, It is recited in the evening and in the morning by observant Jews, “when you lie down and when you rise up,” written on scrolls to be put inside a *mazuzot* and nailed to the doorposts of their homes. *Sh’ma Yisrael, Adonai Ehoheinu, Adonai Echad.* Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. So many of Israel’s blessings, commands and prayers begin with those words: Hear, O Israel, an ancient call to pay attention, to heed the blessing or command or prayer as a community and, through it, become ever more a part of that community. It is a call to hear and remember and then to tell until it becomes part of the conscience of the people, committed to memory, written on the heart in every age. It’s about tradition, about handing down the stories from generation to generation, about passing down the faith. And it’s about the faithfulness that sustains us, and has sustained us, from generation to generation.

In early spring, when we made the decision to move our annual stewardship campaign up a month in order to give the session more time to develop next year’s budget, only a prophet like Amos might have warned us of the impending freefall of the economy, and where was Amos when we needed him?

In spite of the obvious challenge of what might be the worst timing in recent history for a stewardship drive, let me just say that we are not suspending the campaign! Whatever happens, we need to remember that the purpose of the church in times of prosperity and in times of famine remains the same. We are to proclaim the gospel, to bind up the wounded and broken, feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, and be the living body of Christ in a broken and fearful world.

We do all of that, we proclaim the gospel in by telling stories of faith, sometimes with words, sometimes with our lives. At times like this, when the future seems so uncertain, how shall we tell the story to each other? And what shall we tell the children? What shall we tell them about the faith that gives us the courage and the moral fiber to carry on, to keep telling the stories, to spend our inheritance on hope, to be the light of the world in a time when we are anxious and frightened and uncertain of what lies ahead?

Let me share these words from Tom Troeger, a wonderful Christian educator, who I was privileged to hear several years ago at the Presbyterian Church Educators Conference. Troeger talks about building faith as a cathedral might be built. He writes, “Stone by stone a cathedral is built upward into the air.

Act by act, word by word, sacrifice by sacrifice, a temple is shaped in the heart. . . Our faith is an inheritance passed on by stewards of God: prophets who thundered for justice, martyrs who died by flame and sword, reformers who called the church back to the heart of the gospel . . . pastors who tended their flocks, musicians and artists who glorified God through what they created, common folk who day by day gave their witness through acts of compassion and generosity. Whatever faith we have, whatever joy leaps in our souls. . . whatever thanksgiving for the grace of God brims our eyes with tears and our hearts with song, whatever light and truth shine from God's word in our shadowed minds, it is only because of the unbroken chain of God's faithful stewards in every generation."¹

It is only because of the unbroken chain of God's faithful stewards in every generation that we are able to tell the children what it means to be part of the beloved community, what it means to be part of this particular beloved community. So perhaps we begin there.

Much is made, and rightfully so, of the long heritage and legacy of Oak Grove Presbyterian Church. From the time Gideon Pond gathered a small group of worshipers, we have been the light on this corner in Bloomington for more than a hundred years. And we have kept that light alive by telling our story. I chose the particular part of scripture from Deuteronomy because it talks about the importance of remembering who we are, remembering whose we are, and then because it reminds us that it's our job to keep the memory alive from generation to generation. Keep the words in your heart, recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home, when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. Love the Lord your God with all your soul and with all your might.

But, of course, there's more to it than that. We all know that it's fine to keep telling the story, but we are really charged with living the story, with living our faith in visible and concrete ways. Our Gospel lesson today follows on the heels of the Beatitudes, or the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus taught his disciples saying things like, blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven; blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God; blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. And then Jesus said, "you are the salt of the earth. . .you are the light of the world . . . let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

Someone has called this passage "salt and light, shake and shine." The salt part of the equation is pretty easy. We all know that salt enhances and improves the flavor of food. If you've reached the stage of life when you've been told to cut back on your salt intake, you know that French fries are just not the same without salt! And many of us are now starting to "brine" the Thanksgiving

¹ Thomas Troeger, "Spending Our Inheritance on Hope," *Faithfulness Sustains the Generations*, p. 6.

turkey before putting it in the oven, having learned that an overnight soak in a salt solution keeps the big bird juicier and more tender.

Salt does more than improve flavor. The disciples would have known about its use as a preservative. In a time when there was no other way to preserve food, salt was often used to make a brine for preserving fruits and vegetables, or on meat or fish that was to be dried and cured. There is also evidence that salt was thrown on the ground as a fertilizer to restore the balance in the soil – salt of the earth. And all of us know that if we get salt in an open sore, it hurts like the dickens. Do we also know that in a less condensed version, in a mild solution, it promotes healing?

Salt and light, shake and shine. Jesus went on to remind the disciples that a city built on a hill cannot be hidden, that we are not to hide our light under a bushel basket, but on a lamp stand where it can illuminate the whole house. In other words, don't be a little light, when you have the potential to be a lot brighter, when you have the opportunity to shine and illuminate.

Many of us, perhaps all of us, would say that we're a bit reluctant to shine too brightly, and we certainly don't want the spotlight directly on us. We'd just like to be "little lights," going about our business quietly and indirectly. It's almost as though we come with built-in dimmer switches, afraid to be so bright that we might call attention to ourselves.

Almost fifteen years ago now, we were all quoting South African president Nelson Mandela's 1994 inauguration speech, only to discover that his words about all of us being meant to shine should have been credited to a woman named Marianne Williamson, an author and lecturer in new age spirituality. Maybe you've heard it before:

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?' Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn't serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God within us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."²

My point is that if we're going to continue to be the light of the world, the beacon of hope on this corner, we have to keep the flame alive, we all have to burn as brightly as we can. If we are to have any hope of keeping the story alive, we have to be here to tell it. And being here is going to take our time, our money, our talents and gifts, our willingness to be the salt and light in the story.

And what a great and generous God has provided all that we need to do just that. The generosity of God flowing through those who built this church, now flowing through us so that we can pass it on. The faithfulness of God flowing

² Marianne Williamson, *Return to Love*, 1992.

through the faithfulness of those who really did spend their inheritance on hope, so that we could light up this corner with hope.

We all know that stewardship isn't about the budget. Or isn't only about the budget – I could almost hear the members of the Stewardship Committee hyperventilating when I said that – it's about our grateful response to God's generosity. It's about saying "thank you" again and again. Giving is spiritually healthy and it is a form of discipleship. Someone has said that stewardship is "everything I do, after I say, 'I believe.'" Everything I do, after I say, "I believe."

Among my stewardship resources, I ran across an article clearly meant for pastors trying to find new ways to talk about stewardship, entitled "Things to Think About When You Think About Money in the Church." A couple of bullet points caught my eye, like this one: "Your congregation has all the money it needs. Yes, and most of it is still in the people's pockets (and yours too!). But the best way to promote generous giving is to celebrate God's generosity, invite people's grateful response, and point out the great stuff that happens when people give." That was followed by this one: "People don't give money because the church has needs. At least, that is the motivator for fewer and fewer givers. People give money when they see that the church meets needs."

If you are planning to attend one of the stewardship gatherings, you will have the chance, as those who were here yesterday morning did, to see a video that Dries made for us that is such a testimony to God's faithfulness and generosity, to the faithfulness and generosity of all those who came before us here at Oak Grove, and to our continuing faithfulness and generosity as we try to meet the needs of our congregation, our community, our world.

We know that the current state of the economy will have an impact on our ability to meet the 2009 budget. We know, and we understand that pledging is not possible for everyone, we know that some of us will have to decrease our pledge this year or keep it at the same level, but we also know that some of us can give a little bit more. Last week in worship, Beth read the children a book about "Mama Panya's Pancakes," which reminded us that there is always enough for everyone. When Adika asks Mama Panya how much they will need for all those pancakes, Mama Panya says, "Oh a little bit. . . and a little bit more." This year we need a little bit. And we need a little bit more.

Tom Troeger offers this definition of stewardship. He says it is "opening ourselves to become a vessel of the never ending giving of God. A steward is a window through whom the light shines, a door through whom wind rushes, a well through whom living waters rise." He goes on to remind us that, like those who built the cathedral stone by stone, "We realize we will never see the completion of what we are building in this life, but we keep on building anyway. We trust that we will someday join the cloud of witnesses. And then we will offer ceaseless thanks for God's willingness to move through the stewardship of our brief lives so that our children and children yet unborn might be nurtured in the love and grace of Jesus Christ." May it always be so here at Oak Grove. Amen.