

On Relationship: Relationship with Those Who Have Gone Before Us  
Deuteronomy 6: 1-13, John 14: 1-3  
June 2, 2019

Our series On Relationships wraps up this morning, with an emphasis on Relationships with Those Who Have Gone Before Us.

Pastor Abby and Pastor Lauren have been doing a great job preaching through this series, and I'm glad to be joining them in the pulpit after five months away. As I mentioned this to a friend, I was assured, "preaching is just like riding a bike, you never forget." I then told my friend, "Yeah, but when I pulled my bike out of the garage this spring, both of the tires were flat and the chain was a little rusty." And my friend changed the subject

The theme, "Relationships with Those Who Have Gone Before Us, had me thinking back to seminary and a story I learned about my Grandpa Lippert. My parents both come from devout Baptist families. My mother's father, my Grandpa Benhardus was a Baptist minister until he died of Lou Gehrig's disease when my Mom was thirteen. My Grandpa Lippert wanted to be a Baptist minister, but was never able to leave the farm. I didn't know him either. He died of a heart attack when I was a year old. My Grandpa Lippert was very involved in the Baptist Convention (the United Church of Christ equivalent of the Conference or the wider church). He traveled around to churches to speak when they were doing stewardship drives. I guess he was particularly persuasive when it came to encouraging members of other churches to empty their pockets for the Lord.

My Dad's sister Rosie, married an aspiring Reformed minister who attended United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities and was ordained as a UCC minister in 1961. When I

started attending United Theological Seminary, my Aunt Rosie and uncle Don met regularly with Sara and me to take us out to supper and share stories and provide support. They told stories about how seminary had changed. For instance, when Don was attending seminary, there was a class for Rosie to attend that taught her how to iron Don's robes. Needless to say, as feminist theology became the dominant perspective at United Seminary, that class was seen as a wrinkle in the curriculum that needed to be ironed out.

At one of those suppers, my uncle Don asked about my classes. I told him that a class I was enjoying, but that was extremely difficult was a seminar on the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher was a preacher and theologian during the time of the enlightenment. At a time when the findings of modern science and historical study were leading many to say that being religious was incompatible with being a modern, thinking person, Schleiermacher said, "Of course not." He said that religion is not the same as science or knowledge, religion is "a sense and taste for the Infinite." Religion is a matter of the heart. In his view, religion and science are perfectly compatible. One of the saints of First UCC is Ian Barbour who spent his career at Carleton studying the intersection of science and religion. In many ways Ian Barbour stood in the tradition of Schleiermacher.

Anyway, as I talked about how difficult it was to read Schleiermacher, my uncle said to me, "you know your grandfather was reading Schleiermacher." What? My uncle continued, "one summer after classes had finished I was working for your grandfather, and we were in the field talking. As I was telling him what I was learning and how my thinking was changing he said to me, "that sounds like something Schleiermacher would say." "How did he know that?" "He liked keeping up on theology," my uncle said.

It was a small anecdote but it meant so much to me. This was a time in my life when I was seeking. I was trying to figure out if it was possible to hold together the Christian faith with all that I was learning about science and human history. I felt alone. Not only did I admire my Baptist grandfather, who didn't go to college, but was reading dense German theology in his spare time, I wondered if he was asking at least some of the same questions that I was. I felt like I had companions, with a grandfather I had never spoken with on one side and a German preacher and theologian who lived centuries earlier on the other. We were connected across time. There was a taste of the infinite there. Something Holy was in it.

As a Christian, I feel this kind of connection increasingly with many ancestors of faith, and I view the Bible as a collection of the voices of our ancestors. One realization I had as I was sitting in Hebrew Scripture classes in seminary, was that my Bible prof, Carolyn Pressler, and my other Bible professors too, didn't talk about how God wrote the Bible. They talked about the people who wrote the Bible. These people wrote about their experiences of God. They wrote seeking to name the revealing of God, and the movement of God in their midst. God spoke through the Bible, the Divine spoke through these people, but people wrote the Bible.

This realization was extremely helpful. It meant that the biblical writers, our ancestors of faith, were writing the Bible as they were wrestling with the challenges of life. Our ancestors wrote the scriptures as they were in crisis and crying out for help. They wrote the Bible as they were finding meaning, facing their fears, making sense of where they had come from and where they were going as a people, and articulating their hopes for their lives together.

Out of these moments of crisis, heartache and wrestling, over and over again they were proclaiming, God is trustworthy and true. There is powerful love in our midst that will not abandon us. This love brings life from death. This love is stronger than anything else. This love is where you should place your trust. Our ancestors were witnessing to how they experienced God to be, and we would be wise to listen to them and at the very least test out what they are saying to us. Whether or not they intended to be in relationship with generations to come, they are; and we are in relationship with them.

Our scripture from Deuteronomy for today is a central Biblical text, the Great Commandment, also known as the Shema. It serves as the centerpiece of morning and evening Jewish prayer services. What is interesting in these verses for me this week, is how this passage is connected to both the past and the future. God is named as the God of your ancestors, the God of the ones who have gone before. And the concern is how to pass down what is most important to future generations. The question is, “what kind of practice is needed so that my children and my children’s children will thrive? So that the people will thrive? The answer: “pray this in the morning and as the last words before you go to sleep: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”

“Pay attention, stay rooted in this redeeming, renewing, stronger than anything else, love that is in the center of it all. Stay centered in this love, remember in the morning and remember in the evening, and you will truly live. And pass it along to the next generations.”

Our verses from John 14 are a part of the Farewell Discourse of Jesus, and Christians throughout time have found great comfort in these words as we face the reality of our mortality. In the story, Jesus is beginning a long and very complicated way of saying goodbye to the eleven disciples after the last supper and before the crucifixion. But through the Farewell Discourse and these speeches of Jesus, the writer is also speaking to an early church community that was facing persecution and the reality of death.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe<sup>[a]</sup> in God, believe also in me. <sup>2</sup>In God’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?<sup>[b]</sup> <sup>3</sup> And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

What is most important to me in this passage is the feeling. The assurance that we do not need to be afraid. We can trust in this love that is at the center of all even as we are faced with our own mortality. Like the words of Jesus suggest, I feel connected to my ancestors in this too. Where all others have gone we will go too. We will not be alone. Those who have gone before us have trusted these words, have found these words to be helpful, and keep passing them on again and again to us.

When I was serving Plymouth UCC in Dodgeville, WI, one of the matriarchs of that congregation was Betty Hughes. Betty was lively, outspoken, not always popular, and dedicated to the church. She was on the edge of 90 years old when I got to know her. One Thanksgiving Day, as I was with family in Iowa, I received a call from her daughter that Betty

had taken a bad fall and was in the hospital. I explained that I was a days travel away, but that we were returning the next day and that I would stop and see her.

We drove home. When we arrived, I drove to the local hospital to see Betty. I knocked on her door, stepped inside. "Hi Betty, it's Pastor Todd." "Well, it's about time!" she said. I smiled. We talked about Thanksgiving and her fall. Then she said to me, "I'm not afraid to die." And she spoke of her faith, words of scripture that she was holding onto right then. Advice and assurance from our ancestors. I thought, "this is Christian faith doing exactly what it should do: Helping us find a place for our fears even in the face of what we fear the most. And Betty was leaning on her ancestors of faith, and I will continue to lean on Betty as one of my ancestors of faith.

We stand on the shoulders of our ancestors of faith. We are linked arm in arm across time. They teach us, inspire us, assure us. We discover our story in their stories, our struggles in their struggles. And we seek to hand down what we have learned to those who will come after us too. There's something Holy in that, and I'm grateful for it. Amen.