



The Promised Land (7/8/18)

Deuteronomy 6:4-5; Mark 12:28-31

Deuteronomy 6:4-5

⁴ Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. ⁵ You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

Mark 12:28-31

²⁸ One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” ²⁹ Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one;’ ³⁰ you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ ³¹ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

Sermon

Good morning. And, wow! It’s hard to believe this day is really here! You folks have been wandering in the wilderness for close to four years. As we all know, this whole process is exhausting. Just when you think the search process is over, there’s one more hoop to jump through, it feels like it’s never over.

Which is a lot like packing and moving. Three weeks ago, I didn’t think I had that much stuff! But there was always another drawer or closet that had stuff in

it—stuff that I would need or that I couldn't stand to throw out. So, you're stuck with me; I don't ever want to move again!

Moving is never fun. It forces us to make changes, or at least acknowledge gradual changes that have been taking place over many years. Those changes can be as small as all the stuff one acquires over the course of eleven-and-a-half years, living in the same apartment. I won't lie to you, I miss my old apartment. It was the place where I lived when I discerned my call to ministry. It was where I lived when I went to seminary. It was the first place I could truly call my own.

My apartment was filled with artwork, most of it by my dad, and my dad hung most of the paintings in my apartment. My dad died about five years ago. I can't ask him to hang any more paintings. I will never live in another home that my dad visited.

I truly believe that I'm in the right place, at the right time. I believe this is a place where we may all grow together—that I may grow further into my call as a pastor and that you may grow as a congregation, in all the different ways a congregation may grow. In many times and many ways, growth follows loss. But I think it's healthy to acknowledge the loss, in order to celebrate the gains. Also, it's important to remember our true identity in Christ, rather than in our possessions, our jobs, or the places where we live.

This notion of true identity is at the heart of both of our readings this morning, which is why I chose these Scriptures. I think Book of Deuteronomy is particularly appropriate. The name *Deuteronomy* can be translated as “second law.” The book is presented as a final series of speeches or sermons given by Moses to the Israelites before they enter the Land of Canaan. In that series of sermons, Moses re-tells or resets the law that was given by God to the Israelites during the Exodus. As one scholar puts it, “Israel was standing in the interim period of the saving history between, on the one hand, the completion of her election as [God's] peculiar people, and on the other, the fulfillment of the divine promise.”¹

Here's the situation: God's chosen people, Israel, are about to enter into the Promised Land. They were delivered from slavery, but their salvation will not be

¹ Gerhard von Rad. *Old Testament Theology*. Volume 1. Translated by D.M.G. Stalker. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press (1962), 223.

complete until they enter the land of Canaan. They are on the cusp of something new, so Israel needs to be reminded of who they are and who they're called to be.

We, too, are on the cusp of something new. I've served two interim pastorates; I have loved the people I served, but I haven't been able to enter into long-term relationships with either congregation. And you folks are really like the Israelites—you wandered in the wilderness for a long time. Now, we are beginning a new era in the life of this congregation! But before we begin this relationship, we have some really important material to review.

Most scholars think that Deuteronomy was composed over a number of centuries, and long after Moses died and the Israelites entered the Promised Land.² The Book of Deuteronomy is all about covenant theology; it's the “shape and substance of Israel's faith.”³ It provides a systematic interpretation of what it means to be in a right relationship with God. The authors of Deuteronomy were trying to reaffirm and revitalize the central tenets of the Jewish faith. And at the center of that faith is this morning's reading from Deuteronomy. But don't take my word for it. Jesus thinks this is pretty important, too!

In our lesson from the Gospel of Mark, a scribe asks Jesus which commandment is the greatest of all. Jesus begins by quoting a portion of the greatest statement of faith in the Old Testament: *Shema y'israel, Adonai eloheinu, Adonai echad*. That is, “Hear, O Israel, 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.” Scholars refer to these verses as the *shema*. Practicing Jews also know this as the *shema*, because that is the first word in Hebrew: Listen! Hear! It's a command.

You can almost hear Moses preaching to the Israelites: Listen to me, guys! This is really important! The Lord is our God; the Lord, alone! This is the great statement of monotheism. It sets the Hebrew religion apart from all other religions of the ancient Near East. Both Martin Luther and John Calvin identify the Shema as the essential statement of the covenantal relationship between God and humanity.⁴

² Ronald E. Clements. *Deuteronomy*. In Volume 2 of *The New Interpreter's Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press (1998), 278.

³ Walter Brueggemann. *Deuteronomy*. Nashville: Abingdon Press (2001), 17.

⁴ Patrick D. Miller. *Deuteronomy*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press (1990), 14-15.

Why would the authors of Deuteronomy need to restate this? Why would the covenants that were expressed in Genesis, Exodus, and Leviticus need to be restated and then placed in the mouth of Moses? One answer is Israel had a long history of questioning God and worshiping other gods when they doubted God's love and care. Think of the golden calf. Think of the Second Commandment. Remember, too, that in the time of King Ahab, the people of Israel were trying to worship both God and Baal. And the prophet Elijah said to the people: "How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, follow him."⁵ There is even archaeological evidence of these divided loyalties: there are inscriptions at cultic sites from the Northern Kingdom dedicated to "YHWH and his Asherah."

Yet for all this, for all the times Israel turned away from God and worshiped idols, God still welcomed the chosen people back. And when even that wasn't enough, God didn't give up on humanity. No. God sent Jesus into the world, so that humanity might have another chance at reconciliation.

Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Nothing. What does God do when humanity still can't get it right? God sends Jesus. What does Jesus tell us to do? Love God with every fiber of your being. It's worth noting that the verb, to love, has a different sense in Hebrew than it does in English. In English, the verb describes a state of being. I love my mother. I love pizza. I love the Pittsburgh Steelers. At no point in the last three sentences does my love require me to act. Though I love pizza, I have no plans to eat pizza after church today. Though I love the Steelers, I have to wait another month or two to watch them play. My love doesn't call me to action.

The Hebrew language is very different from English. It's a language of verbs. The verb, to love, implies action on the part of the one who loves. To love God is to act on that love. To love God is to act ethically in service to God and on behalf of God. So, in that episode, Jesus reminds us that we are commanded to love God. We're not supposed to argue which of the Ten Commandments is most important; we're supposed to love God with every fiber of our being and in everything that we do. This commandment is what Jesus says is the very most important commandment. And in the very next breath, Jesus says something else. He reminds us of Leviticus 19:18; he commands us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. This isn't just a state of being; this is about acting on our love. We must demonstrate our love in tangible ways—for God and for the rest of humanity.

⁵ 1 Kings 18:21

God created our neighbors, too, so showing love for our neighbors becomes an act of love for God; it is a way for us to remain in the covenant with God.

We were all created in God's overwhelming, abundant love. That love is bigger than any words that we can use to describe that love. That love is so great that God entered the created world in the person of Jesus so that we may live more fully into that love, so that we may act on and in that love. As we begin this relationship together, as we cross into the promised land together, let us always remember that love is an active verb. Let us remember that it is our highest duty and greatest honor to love God and to love our neighbors. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Benediction

Now, beloved, as you depart from this place, remember that we are called to be the Church, the body of Christ in the world today. Go forth and be instruments of God's love and peace and reconciliation. Do not return evil for evil to any person, but know that we are all loved by God, and that we are called to reflect that love to everyone we meet. Go forth and be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. In the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord, let all God's children say, **Amen!**