



At the Threshold

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

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“Good endings make for good beginnings.” This is a teaching that I received from Father Robert Petite, an Episcopalian priest who mentored me when I was a summer ministry intern at an Episcopalian retirement community. As a priest who ministered to older adults nearly his whole professional life, he put this teaching to work every day.

Once a week we met so that I could reflect with him on my new pastoral experiences; I always looked forward to these meetings. About two weeks into my internship, he asked me if I was actively getting to know the residents. At the risk of disappointing him, I shared with him that I was feeling shy about doing so, not because I am shy, but because I wondered if the residents of the community might tire of getting to know yet another group of ministry interns. Given the ongoing rotation of interns at this retirement community, I feared that they might not have the energy or interest to invest in a relationship with me.

Father Petite took my concern to heart, and that is when he told me that good endings make for good beginnings. He explained to me that when we have experienced good closure at the end of our relationships - with family members, friends, neighbors, anyone, even pastors --, we are more likely to be open and receptive to beginning new relationships. In his ministry with older adults, he had observed the reality that as we get older in years, more and more of the people we know pass away. Though we may not think of it at the time, the intentional work of creating closure prepares us to be ready for and receptive of new relationships in the future. Good closure prepares us to cross the threshold between endings and beginnings.

Closure can be achieved in different ways. One of the privileges of the church's ministry is to provide closure at times of death by celebrating a person's life and witnessing to the promise of eternal life. Each memorial service, each burial, serves that important function.

In the bible, in both the Old and New Testaments, we find closure to be brought about by farewell speeches. You may recall that in the gospel of John, as Jesus prepares his disciples for his own death, Jesus gives them a farewell speech that extends over three chapters. In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses gives his valedictory address. In fact, the whole book of Deuteronomy - all 34 chapters - is a valedictory speech. Perhaps because Moses was considered the greatest prophet in its history, ancient Israel devoted the whole book to bringing about the closure it needed when Moses died. By looking at its content, perhaps we can gain some wisdom about what makes for good closure when we stand at the threshold of life and death and the promise of life eternal.

Moses' farewell speech seems to consist of three parts. In the first part, Moses provides a rapid recap of all that God has done for them. Moses rehearses God's mighty acts that brought the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt to the point where they are now, just across the Jordan River, poised to enter the promised land. Like most journeys, their journey had a destination, a goal. The Israelites had to be reminded of the goal to reach the land that God had promised to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and then to Moses. Generation after generation, the promise had to be reiterated to the

people, because it took a long time to reach it, and it took a hard struggle to get there. During Moses' lifetime, it took forty years in the wilderness, and so he is speaking now to a different generation than the one he had led out of Egypt. We can imagine how powerfully the promise of freedom and land would have motivated an enslaved people to escape Egypt and to get through their years of hardship in the wilderness. Poised now finally to reach their goal, Moses reminds the people of their story. He wants them to remember and give thanks for the promise that God had made to them in the first place, and by rehearsing God's mighty acts - how God faithfully brought them to every point along the way, and now to this point - Moses wants them to be faithful to God.

Just in case this emotional recitation of their story isn't enough to move them to remain faithful, however, Moses includes something else in his farewell address. He rehearses the Ten Commandments that God gave Israel at Sinai. Isn't it interesting that just as they are poised to reach their destination, to enter the promised land, Moses still feels the need to equip them in this way, with the law?

One of the first courses I took in graduate school was Introduction to Philosophical Ethics. The course was organized in such a way that I still remember it today. The field of ethics was presented to us as having arisen out of two human quests. One quest is goal-oriented and can be framed by the question: what is good? In order to know *how to live*, we should ask this prior question, *what is good*. The assumption is that everyone strives for whatever he or she thinks is good. It is human nature to pursue the things we want. Great philosophers like Aristotle, therefore, sought to know what the highest good is. Is it happiness, wealth, health, or long life?

The second quest is rule-oriented and can be framed by the question: what is my duty, or what is right? In order to know how to live, we should ask the prior question of what is the law? The assumption underlying this quest to know the law is the recognition that when different people are pursuing whatever they think is good, they sooner than later can come into conflict with one another. Sometimes they come into conflict because they are competing for the same good, and other times their notions of what is good come into conflict. In either case, rules or laws are designed to arbitrate those conflicts, and when there are laws, irrespective of what we want to pursue, it is our job to ask what is the law?

For Jews and Christians, the Ten Commandments have been paradigmatic of the second quest. The Ten Commandments provide laws that tell us not to want what our neighbor has, not to worship anything other than God, not to kill another person. The Ten Commandments tell us what our duty in life is - to worship God alone, to reserve one day every week for rest, to honor our parents.

Over the course of history, different cultures have perhaps oriented themselves around one question more than the other question, but most likely every civilization has needed to address both questions. Isn't it interesting that here, in his valedictory address, Moses spends time talking about both - the goal of the promised land and all the good that the land stands for as well as the law? Both are given by God.

But that's not all. Moses's speech is steeped in language about the covenantal relationship between God and the people. All of God's mighty acts bringing Israel out of slavery and to the promised land were part of the covenant God made with God's people, in which God said, "I shall be your God, and you shall be my people." All the laws commanded by God were part of the covenantal relationship established between God and the people. That is why, as he recited them, Moses said over and over, "Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes."

The truth is, of course, we do fail to keep God's commandments. Even the commandment we were supposed to inscribe on our hearts - to love God and to love our neighbor - we fail to keep. So, we have to be told again and again, to love one another as God has loved us.

Generations later, in Jesus' farewell speech, he speaks about this love. Reinterpreting the law, summing it up, Jesus says to his disciples and to every subsequent generation of disciples, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. . . . Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them" (John 14:15a & 23).

The church is the inheritor of God's covenant. And I thank God for that, because the covenant provides something more than the promise and the law that God has given to us. The covenant exists for a reason. It exists precisely because we don't always achieve our good goals and because we don't always live according to the law or up to our duties. We fall short of our goals and fail to act lovingly all the time. And it is especially at those times that we can thank God for staying in relationship with us and for keeping us in relationship with one another.

The church is created by this covenant. And in this way, we are not like other groups. We are different from families that share flesh and blood, because we are tied together by water and the Spirit. We are different from a tribe, ethnicity, or race, because we are called to transcend those things that we might or might not have in common with others. We are different from a social club or an interest group, where we tend to spend time with people we like because they are like ourselves in some way. Even though we want to deepen our knowledge through study and reflection, we are different from a university or college. Even though we care about the health and well-being of one another, we are different from a hospital and from a therapy practice. We are different from a political party. We are different from a civic group, and we are different from civic society. All of us have affiliations across many, if not all, of these social spheres, and every one of these spheres has its own norms that govern them. It's hard to figure out and preserve with clarity what those norms are supposed to be. And for Christians, because the church isn't simply one sphere alongside all these other spheres, we have to struggle with how we can live as Christians in the multiple spheres of our lives. And so sometimes it gets confusing and messy; for example, we might act here in the church in ways that might be appropriate in the university or in the public square, but that fall short of Jesus' commandment to love one another. And when this happens, it is especially important to remember what Moses reminded the Israelites and what Jesus reminded the disciples right before they died. Both Moses and Jesus spoke of the covenant that would hold God in relationship with the people and the people in relationship with one another. This covenantal relationship holds us together, even when, especially when, we fall short of our goals and fail to act lovingly.

To be a member of the church is not to be a member of a perfect people or a holy order. To think otherwise would be to set ourselves up for great disappointment and disillusionment. The church is not holy or perfect, but it is a community of saints who hold together, work together, forgiving one another and loving each other, because God has forgiven us and has loved us.

When we remember the saints, as we do on this day, we remember their humanity. They were not perfect. By remembering that the church - this church and every church - is made up of the company of saints, living and past, we gain a long view of God's covenant with us, a covenant that has extended over generations, through all the achievements and failures, the rights and wrongs, the dreams and disappointments. Through all of this, because of God's covenant with us, we hold fast not just to what we think is good and right, but also to one another, forgiving, loving, and leaning on one another.