

PENTECOST XV, 2018
Deuteronomy 4.1-2, 6-9

In March of 1630 the ship Arbella set sail for New England. On board her and the other ships traveling with her were 1,000 pilgrims intent on founding the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Before taking off, the pastor of the ship, John Winthrop, delivered what has become one of the most famous sermons in American history: “A Model of Christian Charity.”

Winthrop said the Pilgrims were about to found a new society in a new world: “We are entered into covenant with God for this work of establishing a new colony.” How were they to live together? What would be the keys to a successful colony?

Winthrop’s answer was: love, rooted in faith in God. They would establish a new society based upon a bond of love. To accomplish this, he calls upon his listeners: “...we must love brotherly without dissimulation, we must love one another with a pure heart fervently. We must bear one another’s burdens. We must not look only on our own things, but also on the things of our brethren... [We must] put the interests of others and of the colony above our own interests.” The only way to avoid failure as a colony and to provide for their posterity was “to follow the counsel of Micah (6.8): to do justice, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God.”

Winthrop warned that the whole world was watching what they were attempting to do in their new colony. “The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world.” But if the people would walk in the ways of the Lord and practice genuine love for each other, their colony would be a model for the world for future generations. They would be “as a city upon a hill.”

The ideas in Winthrop’s sermon – the idea that we are a covenant society, that we are accountable to God for the outcome of our community life, that we are responsible for each other, that God’s truth and ways provide the proper ordering of our

community – were drawn from the Bible, especially from Deuteronomy, which is our Old Testament reading today. Indeed, Winthrop concluded his sermon quoting from Deuteronomy 30, in words much like our reading today:

Therefore, let us choose life that we and our seed may live, by obeying [God’s] voice and cleaving to Him, for He is our life and our prosperity.

This was no mere coincidence. Winthrop saw the situation of the colonists heading to found a new colony in a new land like that of the Jews in Deuteronomy. In our reading today, the Jews are about to enter the land God promised to their ancestors: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Behind them is the long journey of 40 years after the Exodus from Egypt. They are about to found a new nation, bound together by a covenant with God. Their society was not based on a hierarchy of power but on a shared sense of calling and destiny. Their society would be dedicated to creating a just and gracious society that honors the dignity of all, especially the downtrodden, the poor, the powerless and the marginal: the widow, the orphan and the stranger.

Someone once quipped, “How odd of God to choose the Jews.” Odd indeed. In choosing the Jews God has taken a people to be partners with Him in the ongoing work of creation. They were called to be God’s own people, a holy nation, to show the rest of the world what a society that honors each individual as the image of God looks like. Ordering their life by God’s law and walking in His ways, God’s people would be a role model of what can happen when the human race worships the one God who made us all in His image.

Such a community does not happen automatically or easily. They had gained their freedom from slavery in Egypt. They were about to found a nation. Now they had to learn how to live as a free people. Thus Moses, as he begins his instruction to the people before they enter the land God is giving them, exhorts them to give heed to God’s commandments that the Lord has given them, that they may live. If the Jews would do this, they would gain the admiration of the world for the

greatness of the laws of God that ruled their life. This was the challenge before them: to live as the free people God had made them.

The key word in our text is: remember. Teaching freedom begins with remembering how you got to be free. You know what an amnesiac is: a person who has lost his or her memory. Without memory, they literally do not know who they are. We are what we remember. Winston Churchill said, "The longer you can look back, the further you can look forward." If you do not remember your past, where you came from, you don't know where you are going.

In Deuteronomy's listing of the Ten Commandments, the reason for the command to "Honor the Sabbath Day" is for the purpose of remembering: "You shall remember that you were slaves in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day." Sabbath day worship for the Jews has always been a community exercise of remembering who they are, how they got to where they are, and what God wants them to do.

So, it is in Christian worship. Our liturgy is saturated with the memory of what God has done and how God made us who we are. The first half of our worship service is praising God for what He has done, listening to the story of God in the reading of Scripture and proclaiming His Word for today, and confessing our faith in the Creeds. All of that is an exercise in spiritual memory. And the second half of our liturgy centers on the one great act of remembering what God has done for us and our salvation in Jesus: "Do this in remembrance of me." Listen closely to the Prayer of Thanksgiving during the liturgy of Holy Communion. It is a remembering of what God has done, is doing, and will do for His people and all creation. A remembering of our past, our present, and our future, where we come from and where God is taking us.

God is near us, as Deuteronomy says and as St. Paul quoted this passage in his Letter to the Romans. God is as near to you as His Word that you hear, read, and preached. God is as near to you as the bread you eat and the wine you drink, Christ

given and shed for you. God is near to you, that you may remember who you are and what God wants you to do.

This leads me to wonder: Is the root of our problems today due to a loss of memory? Do we suffer from a case of spiritual amnesia? In all the busyness and distractions of our lives, have we lost the memory of the story that tells us who we are, how we got here, where we are going, and thus how to live along the journey?

Thus, in our reading Moses sets forth the first obligation of a free society: to teach it to their children. Teach what it means to live as a free people, to educate their children in their history and the obligations and expectations of their nation:

Only take heed, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things which your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children.

Freedom must be taught. The fate of freedom in the future depends on what we teach our children today. As a favorite writer of mine has written (Jonathon Sacks): "To defend a country you need an army, but to defend a civilization you need education. That is why Moses spoke about the duty of parents in every generation to educate their children about why freedom matters and how it was achieved."

You are probably familiar with a relay race in track and field events. Do you know where the race is won or lost? In the passing of the baton. So it is with the Christian faith. The Church is always one generation away from extinction. Our age is an age of technological wonders. Computer and smartphone memories have grown so fast and huge, while people remember less and less of their history. So, people are easily swept along by the latest fad or pied piper. We can't delegate the memory of our spiritual heritage to our machines. We have to renew it regularly and teach it to ourselves and the next generation. Do not drop the baton of faith! As our Lord Christ says, "If you continue in My Word, you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. Amen.