

The 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Deut. 34:1-12; Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17; Matt. 22:34-46; I Thess. 2:1-8

Each of these passages deals with a giant of the faith – Moses, Jesus and Paul – and how each demonstrates the legitimacy and authenticity of his ministry as it is focused on the acting out of the two great commandments. As such, these passages then say something to us about what our ministries need to be about.

Deuteronomy 34:1-12 reports the close of Moses' life as he views from Mount Nebo a promised land into which he would never enter. He dies and Joshua assumes the leadership of Israel. Deuteronomy then closes with this magnificent commentary on Moses.

The chapter begins, “Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and Yahweh showed him the whole land. Yahweh said to him, ‘This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, I will give it to your descendants; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.’ Then Moses, the servant of Yahweh, died there in the land of Moab, at Yahweh’s command. He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day. Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated. The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended” (34:1, 3-8).

It is the book of Deuteronomy that records the death of Moses. His death was preceded by his orderly preparation of Israel for his departure. He had gathered the people together on Mount Ebal overlooking the Jordan River. There, he had a “standing unhewn stone” erected (likely similar to the stones at Stonehenge) upon which (or next to which on a flat stone) the Law (likely, the Ten Commandments) had been chiseled (Deut. 27). He then had the Law read to the people and proclaimed to them the curses that would befall them as a nation if they disobeyed this law and the blessings that would come upon them if they were faithful to it (27:11-29:1). Moses then led the Israelites in a covenant renewal ceremony, in which they pledged themselves once again to their national covenant with God (29:2-30:18).

Moses then concluded that ceremony with the powerful words. “choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving Yahweh your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that Yahweh swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob” (30:19b-20). He then appointed Joshua as his successor (31:1-15), and then led Israel through a dedication service for Joshua (31:16-29) which includes a beautiful poem traditionally called “the Song of Moses” (32:1-33:29) in which each tribe is blessed by Moses. Completing this recital, the author of Deuteronomy then reports to us the death of Moses.

Moses was a “larger-than-life” figure in Israel; in fact, he was indisputably Israel’s most important figure. He was the one who brought about their liberation from Egypt, led them through their 40-year sojourn in the wilderness, gave them their Law, organized their worship of Yahweh and, in reality, was the founder of the nation. Consequently, the danger that faced Israel was that the veneration of Moses could easily slip over into the worship of Moses by

succeeding generations. It would have been easy for his memory to become the center of Israel's life rather than the nation's commitment to Yahweh. His grave, for example, could have become the focus of mass pilgrimages and even a sacred site. It is therefore intriguing how the conclusion of Moses' life is handled to guarantee that such would not happen.

First, Deuteronomy 34 tells us that Moses did not cross over into the Promised Land. He never became Israel's conquering hero; that role was reserved for Joshua. Instead, he was permitted to see the land his people would occupy, but he would never occupy it himself. In a profound way, the people became more privileged than was their liberator. Second, he died alone. No one was with him when he died. Rather, he climbed the slopes of Mount Nebo and disappeared from the sight of the Israelites camped below. Finally, no one knew the site of his death. There would be no "sacred land" to be memorialized! He was buried,¹ but the author of Deuteronomy is very careful to report, "but no one knows his burial place to this day". So he neither died and then just decayed (so that his bones might be someday discovered and thus venerated) nor did any Israelite bury him (so that no one knew the site of his grave). And all this was carefully done so that Israel's eternal attention would not center upon Moses but upon the One whom Moses worshipped – Yahweh – "he who causes to be what is caused to be"!

Two other statements are made about Moses in this death chapter. The first was the commentary that Moses "was 120 years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated" (vs. 7), thus proclaiming that Moses had remained firmly in charge of Israel to his dying day. The other, and far more profound, commentary is the phrase, "Moses, the servant of the Lord".

This is the supreme compliment that either Israel or God could give to Moses – "the servant of the Lord". This title is only sparingly used throughout scripture. It is used here of Moses. It is used for God's most-precious Messianic figure (Isa. 42:1; 43:10), and it is used of those who follow Jesus (Rom. 1:1, Phil. 1:1). The "servant of the Lord" is that title used for those who best and most faithfully fulfill God's purpose on earth. And that, was indeed, who this man Moses was!

The story continues, "Joshua, son of Nun, was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him; and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as Yahweh had commanded Moses" (Deut. 34:9). The baton now passes from Moses' hand to Joshua's. He takes it, and now (after thirty days of mourning) leads Israel to the Jordan River and to the taking of the Promised Land.

The book of Deuteronomy concludes, "Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel" (Deut. 34:10-12).

¹ There is no explanation in the text as to who buried Moses, or how he got buried. But the point of the text is to make clear that no Israelite buried Moses. Later rabbinic tradition taught that Moses was buried by the angels.

How does one know that Moses was a legitimate and authentic prophet to be both respected and followed? First, he knew God “face to face” – that is, he had as full a knowledge of God as was possible for a human being to have. This set him apart, even from other prophets (cf. Num. 12:6-8). He performed “unequaled . . . signs and wonders”. He confronted the leaders of the political, economic and religious systems of Egypt and made them bend to God’s will. Through him, God did “mighty deeds” and “terrifying displays of power”. These are the marks of Moses’ legitimate authority as the greatest of all of Israel’s prophets.

But what was it that Moses was about? Was his objective in life to be such an unequaled and awesome leader? No, that was not his intention at all. That was simply the result of his faithful following of God’s will for his life and ministry. What Moses was called by God to be about was to get Pharaoh to “let my people go” (Exod. 5:1), to form these former slaves into God’s people in the furnace of the wilderness, and to bring them into the Promised Land (34:4). And because he was so single minded in his focus upon that mission, the writer of Deuteronomy could call him “the servant of the Lord” (34:5), the one so in relationship with God that in his actions and ministry, he fulfilled God’s purpose on earth.

Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17 is reputedly a prayer or psalm of Moses; as such, it is the only psalm attributed to Moses. It is likely so attributed because one can easily imagine Moses’ final message to the people, commissioning them to the conquering of Palestine and taking his leave of them concluding with this hymn of praise and prayer.

The psalm is a sobering psalm, best recited near the close of one’s life as he or she reflects upon both the course of that life and the decisions he or she made that closed some doors while opening others – perhaps an investment in public life or in the building of the church at the price of time devoted to one’s children or spouse. Thus, this psalm invites its readers to reflect soberly about one’s life and how that life has been invested – both rejoicing in that which has been productive or even life-transforming to others, and yet always with a price tag attached to it.

It begins with public recognition of the infinitude of God. “Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night” (90:1-2, 3b). Thus, one begins with the solemnity of the extensive and almost unimaginable length of time of earth and of the universe. But even that extended time is dwarfed by the very timelessness of God!

Over against such timelessness, we mortals are as nothing. “The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away” (vs. 10). As I write these words, I am only two days past my 74th birthday. I never imagined I would live so long! But as I look back over those 74 years, I am struck with a few realities. First is how quickly the time has flown! When I was a child, my life and time itself seemed interminable (would Christmas or summer vacation ever come?). The second is how little I feel I accomplished – even though much has been accomplished. But against eternity, it is such a very little bit. The third is the choices I made of what would become my priorities. To seek to do everything equally well (whether as an individual or as a church) is

to guarantee that everything will be done equally poorly! So I made choices, and there was a price paid for such single mindedness! Thus, the psalmist speaks truth when he says that “the days of our life” are short, and “their span is only toil and trouble”!

So how does the psalmist conclude this sober reflection upon his life? He ends it in two ways. First, he declares, “teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart” (vs. 12). Be intentional and single minded about one’s life, not expecting too much of it, but to be both measured and content. But the psalmist goes a step further.

“Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Let your work be manifest to your servants, and your glorious power to their children. Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands – O prosper the work of our hands” (vv. 13, 16-17).

Although the Hebrew word used here is translated “prosper”, it has more the sense in it of “establish” or “secure” than that of “succeed”. The psalmist is not asking that he be a success, but that his labor as a human being has counted for something – that it has made an impact upon at least some small part of humanity (maybe nothing larger than one’s own family), and that it has, in its simplicity and focused labor, contributed to the work of God for the betterment of humanity.

Thus, out of the reflection upon his own life, the psalmist prays for two things. The first is a sense of having found some degree of contentment and shalom in one’s relationship with God and others. The second is that one’s work has in some simple way contributed to the welfare – the shalom – of humanity. It need not be a large or significant contribution; even a little contribution will do! But it is the prayer that our lives have at least in some small way made some sort of difference in humanity. For the saddest words of all, when one considers the fate either of an individual or of all human society, is the tragedy of another poet’s famous epitaph for the human race: “Here were decent godless people: their only monument the asphalt road and a thousand lost golf balls”!²

Which will we choose? Only the way that we live out our lives will make that choice!

Matthew 22:34-46 includes one of Jesus’ best known statements: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (22:37-40).

What is particularly important to recognize, however, is the context in which Jesus made this famed summary of the Law. It was the Pharisees’ final attempt to trick Jesus. The final test by the Pharisees was the question, “Teacher, which commandment in the Law is the greatest” (vs. 36)?

² T.S. Eliot, “Choruses from the Rock”, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (NY: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1952), p. 103.

In their question, the Pharisees were automatically thinking in terms of the Ten Commandments. Jesus' selection of any one of the ten would have held him open to the criticism of minimizing the other nine – all of which were held as sacred. Instead, Jesus shifts the entire field of the debate. He names as the greatest commandment that which was not considered a part of the Ten Commandments but was Israel's "Shemah" – the foundational statement (or what we today would call a mission statement) of Israel (Deut. 6:5). He then adds to it – immediately – a second instruction from Leviticus 19:18, in a connection that had not been made before. This connection makes it clear that the living out of this "first" commandment is done through the faithful acting out of the "second". He then drives the point home by stating "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (22:40) – in other words, here lies the foundation of Hebrew faith and practice.

The Pharisees are hoisted on their own petard! Not only has Jesus easily avoided their trap. He has turned the tables on them. He has in essence said to them, "If you are truly interested in being obedient to the Law (something the Pharisees took pride in being), then love the people around you as you love yourself – rather than obeying all kinds of minute regulations. Treat the poor around you with the "justice and mercy and faith" the Law requires. And that includes the total obedience of the Jubilee and sabbatical laws that will require you to redistribute your wealth to them. Then – and only then – can you say that you love God "with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (vs. 37). Of course, they don't do this, and so they stand condemned!

Jesus then immediately moves onto the offensive by asking, "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" Stunned, they responded, "The son of David". Jesus then replies, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet'?" If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son" (vss. 42-45, quoting from Psalm 110:1)? Matthew then concludes, "No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day, did anyone dare to ask him any more questions" (vs. 46).

Jesus' tormentors are stunned – and thoroughly silenced. He has used their own scripture against them and has argued them quickly and skillfully into a corner. They can only keep quiet and take the verbal beating they have received, to the delight of the crowd. So they realize that they cannot best him in argument, and wisely cease that line of attack.

The skill and impact of Jesus' argument is only understandable within the Jewish cultural context of the relationship between the father and son. In the Jewish culture of Jesus' day, the son remained under the authority and influence of the father far into adulthood. A son could be forty years old and have a family of his own, and his father could be 70, infirm and even feeble-minded. Yet, the father was still the patriarch of his clan, the head of the household and, consequently, "lord" over his son. We pointed out earlier that the Greek word *kyrios* ("lord") was the title for the currently-reigning Caesar. Well, likewise, the father (even though he might be old, infirm and feeble-minded) was *kyrios* over his adult sons and unmarried daughters.

For David to thus call the Messiah "lord" (i.e., the progenitor calling the child his "lord") was simply impossible in Jewish culture. A "father" simply could not and would not do such a thing. The fact that David calls the Messiah "lord" is therefore an indication that the Messiah is not

simply the “son” of David (in that he was born of David’s line later than was David), but is something more than simply the Son of David. That is obviously what Jesus is claiming – that Messiahship is more than the conquering son of a conquering monarch. Rather, he is “Caesar” over that monarch and over all of Israelite life – and is therefore Lord over the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Jerusalem religious elite as well. And that is something they didn’t want to acknowledge! So the only resort of these religious leaders was to keep silent, and to not engage Jesus in argument anymore!

What Jesus does in this argument is to demonstrate to the Pharisees their own inadequate understanding of the Messiah. They have always seen Messiah as a political leader who will set Israel free from Roman tyranny as David did from Philistine tyranny. But Jesus demonstrates to them that their common view of the Messiah is far too limited – that God is going to work through the Messiah as far more than simply his being a political revolutionary.

In reality, what is subtly happening here is an implicit comparison of the Messiah (i.e., Jesus) and Moses. If Moses knew God “face to face”, Jesus knew God even better for he was the Son of God. If Moses committed “signs and wonders” over a thirty-year ministry, Jesus’ three-year ministry was far more powerful and with frequent “signs and wonders” (like healing men born blind, raising the dead, and feeding multitudes). If Moses confronted Pharaoh (the personification of Egypt’s political, economic and religious systems), Jesus much more often and continuously confronted the political, economic and religious leaders of both Israel (Pharisees, Sadducees, priests) and of Rome (Pilate, Herod Antipas). If God did “mighty deeds and terrifying displays of power” through Moses, how much more did he do through Jesus? This Messiah was no simple political leader like David. He was a prophet superior to Moses, and even more than a prophet – the very Son of God (cf. Mt. 4:23-25; Acts 2:22; 3:22-26).

But what was it that Jesus was called to do? More than Moses, Jesus was called to set humanity free of the personal, corporate, social, political, economic and spiritual powers that dominate and control us, to form them into God’s people and to bring them to the place where they could become the kingdom of God to the world. Even more than Moses, Jesus was the true “servant of the Lord”.

With this argument, Jesus brings this scripture full circle. What was it that Jesus was working to bring to fruition in human society? “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt. 22:37-39). Jesus was about the creation of an alternative society -- a shalom community or “kingdom of God” – in which humanity would live in the deepest, most intimate relationship with God that rivaled even Moses’ knowing of God “face to face” (Deut. 6:5). But this alternative society was not simply about an intimate relationship with God, but about “loving your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18).

And what does it mean to love the neighbor? The entire chapter 19 of Leviticus spells out that answer very clearly. The famed statement, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” is the summary statement of that chapter. But what precedes it is a detailed accounting of what it

means to love one's neighbor, either individually or corporately (as a family, neighborhood, village, city or nation).

To love the neighbor is to be centered in God (Lev. 19:1-8), to equitably distribute wealth to the poor (vss. 9-10), to not defraud your neighbor, steal or take advantage of the weak (vss. 11-14), to be just in all adjudications (vss. 15-17), to not take vengeance or act upon a grudge (17-18), to be responsible in your handling of sexual relations (vss. 19-22), to treat the environment with respect (vss. 23-25), to worship nothing but God (vss. 26-31), to be respectful of the elderly (vs. 32), to not oppress the alien (vss. 33-34), and to not seek to take economic advantage of anyone (vss. 35-36). "You shall keep all my statutes and my ordinances, and observe them: I am the Lord" (vs. 37).

All this is what it means to love your neighbor. To create a society centered on loving the neighbor is, in other words, to be building the shalom community in everything that you do, say and are. That is the mission Jesus is about, and to which he is calling and shaping his alternative community of trouble-makers throughout the world.

I Thessalonians 2:1-8 is Paul's defense before the Thessalonian Church. Apparently, in his absence from them, Paul has been the subject of attacks by detractors designed to lessen his influence over these Christians whom he had converted to Christ. Paul argues in this passage that the gospel he has proclaimed to them is authentic and trustworthy, the logical extension of the faith embraced both by Moses and Jesus. His preaching of it to them was not motivated by any self-interest, but by the gospel itself. His preaching came out of the deep affection he had for them, whom he loved with the love of a mother or father (in a profound sense, he was their parent in the faith because he was the one who brought Christianity to them) (2:5-8).

The gospel, Paul declares, is a profound trust that God has invested in us (vss. 8, 9). It is not to be taken lightly nor used for personal aggrandizement. Thus, as Paul has declared the gospel in spite of great opposition (2:2), he has sought to be worthy of the trust God has invested in him. He prays, therefore, that his beloved Thessalonian Christians will continue to embrace the faith that he has sown in them, so that his labor among them "was not in vain" (2:1). In this way, Paul is seeking to be as faithful in his way and with his limitations to the mission given him by God, as Moses and Jesus were faithful to theirs.

This, in turn, becomes example to us about the quality of our ministries, as well. We are to be centered in the promulgation of the gospel – whether to questioning Thessalonians or critical Pharisees or confused disciples or rebellious Israelites. We are to share and live out and practice a faith that is designed to shape our questioning and critical and confused and rebellious people into God's shalom people and work together to build an example or foretaste of the kingdom of God that God is seeking to bring upon our questioning and critical and confused and rebellious world!

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