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“Between the Heart and the Gate”

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Trinity Sunday (Year A)

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Deuteronomy 6:4-9

In Deuteronomy, Moses is providing final instructions to the children of Israel as they are poised to enter the Promised Land after 40 years wandering in the wilderness. He does this by doing what many preachers do on such occasions: he goes back to his files and finds one of his better sermons. Moses repeats for the people the Torah given on Mount Sinai, which is why this particular book of the Bible is called Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy means “the second reading of the Law.”

So fundamental is this teaching for daily life that Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6 in his own temptation experience. He quotes it again in response to the question, “What is the greatest commandment?”

Deuteronomy 6 is a pivotal passage in both Jewish and Christian faith and practice. The essential task of Jew and Christian has been and always will be that found in chapter 6 verse 5: “You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, and with all of your soul, and with all of your might.”

And Moses proposed a particular way for the community of faith to engage this task seriously and comprehensively. “These words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit by your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. And you shall bind them as a sign on your

hand, and they shall be frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”

The key to faith development, as Moses proposes it, is that it takes place between the heart and the city gate and every place in between. It engages each person and the entire community. It is an interior practice but it is not private because it extends to the marketplace. From the door of our house to the place where the community gathers and conducts its business, from the earliest morning until we get into bed at night, from the intimacy of our heart and home to the rigors of commerce, people of faith are to be addressed by, and meditate upon, God’s instruction that gives light upon the path.

The key to loving God is that it takes place between the heart and the gate. The heart, I believe, reflects the personal nature of faith and life, and the gate reflects the social and community nature of that same faith.

In moving into a new land with new leadership and with new opportunities, it was vital for the Jewish people, as it is for us, to remember the Word of the Lord: to remember that which creates and brings life, that which sustains and finally gathers life up at its end. We are called to move between the heart and the gate in our attempt to love God “with all of our heart and soul and might.”

You see, to love God is first of all a personal endeavor. The language used in Deuteronomy is second person singular. Not “you all,” as our Southern way of addressing a group of folks, but more like “Hey, you!” It singles us out to address us personally. *You* shall love the Lord your God with all your heart. Now just because this is a personal endeavor does not make it private. Remember, these words are spoken to the whole community. “Hear, O Israel!” Our personal encounter is possible because God’s saving power comes to the entire people of God: deliverance from bondage, a saving and guiding presence through all the wilderness experiences of our lives.

This personal endeavor to love God requires one to listen, to hear what God would have us understand and do. That is why attention to the Word of God—for the Jews supremely found in Torah and for Christians in Jesus Christ the Word made

flesh—that is why attention to God’s communication with us is so critical. We are called to *live with* the Word when we rise and when we go to bed, when we go out, and when we come in.

Most of us have our own experiences living with and struggling to understand God’s Word as found in scripture. As a child, I memorized Bible passages, and that helped me become familiar with the story. As we get older, we may commit ourselves to more thorough studies of scripture: Bible studies, Sunday School, Disciple Classes, Presbyterian Women’s studies. By doing this, we grow in our understanding of who God is and what God requires of us.

Occasionally people forget the role of the church in teaching us about God’s great love. They may have participated in church at a young age, but later in life found a more meaningful faith. Some may return to the church of their upbringing and make a speech.

“You may remember I was always in Sunday School. I preached the sermon on youth Sunday. I went off to college. You know, while I was here at the church, I really never did know God. It was at another place where I found faith, and I hope that someday you will find faith too.” And in saying that, they throw dust in the face of every Sunday School teacher and elder and saint on the pew who taught them week after week: “This is what Jesus looks like when you meet him.”

You, the church, faithfully reflect this love for God, keeping the embers warm, even if those embers are not always blazing. *Never, never* discount that personal faith which comes from our community and goes back to strengthen our community.

Not only is our love for God a personal endeavor, but our love for God is a domestic endeavor. “You shall take these words and train your children. When you lie down and when you get up, when you go out and when you come in.” Every part of your life, of my life, is part of the training in the domestic scene with our children. In this church, we take seriously the training of our children. But what this passage tells us is that it is not so much what we say or what we teach in our institutional settings that matter.

What matters is what our children *see* us do, day in and day out, and the consistency between our words and actions. The question is never *whether* we are training our children; the question is “*What* are we training them?” We always reveal to those closest to us what is truly important to us by how we live our lives, not merely by what we say.

Our love for God is certainly a personal endeavor and a domestic endeavor; it is also a social endeavor. Our life of faith takes place at the gate, where people come and go, where people live out their lives in the world. It is at the gate, where the commerce of life is exchanged, that the reality of faith confronts the reality of the world.

One task of the social dimension of faith is to impact others for good. We are called to be lights shining in a dark world. We are to reach beyond ourselves and share the goodness we have been given with the world.

In doing that our faith is made real and refined and tested. What we do on Sunday mornings has everything in the world to do with what happens during the week.

The great danger to faith is not some immoral act or disobedience or failure to affirm some eternal truth. It is living as though our faith does not matter. It is living it as though it is merely a private affair.

So a central task of the church is to provide the building blocks in knowing the content of our faith, and a context for living out and implementing that knowledge in practical and impactful ways. Faith development is our growth in loving God as it is enacted between the heart and the gate.

I want to make a general observation. Many within the church, those who have been raised in the faith, are impoverished. Sunday School, along with early training in the home by parents, have been the primary avenues in which adults learned the stories of the Bible and the faith, and that often provides a good foundation. After about age 13 or so, however, faith education ends. There are occasional Bible studies and series on the faith that one may go to, yet a systematic and intentional growth in knowledge and understanding cease.

Now can you imagine doing what you do today in your vocation—as a doctor or lawyer, a nurse, a teacher, in the service industry or in technical work, whatever it is you do—can you imagine doing what you do today on the basis of what you knew in the 7th or 8th grade? In your present work, are you required to do continuing education? And yet many within the church function spiritually on the basis of the knowledge of a 13-year-old. Almost everyone I know says, “I wish I knew the Bible better.” People yearn to know not only how to pray but to experience prayer in their own life and among those within the faith community.

I have been in ministry 30-plus years. Because my vocation demanded it, I learned the Bible and theology and history and pastoral care. If I had been employed outside of this context, I don’t know how much I would have engaged those areas.

And though I am a “professional” in the faith community, even those requirements have not pushed me far enough. It has been life itself—with its challenges and tragedies as well as its joys and hopes—which has driven me to encounter God more deeply in prayer and study and fellowship and service.

I am certain life has pushed you as well.

Frederick Buechner, in his book *A Room Called Remember*, writes about such a time in his life. He was visiting a close friend in the hospital, a young woman he had known from her birth to this moment in her young adult life. She was at the point of death. There to be with her, he had a revelation. He writes:

When the worst finally happens, or almost happens, a kind of peace comes. I had passed beyond grief, beyond terror; all but beyond hope. It was there in that wilderness that for the first time in my life, I caught sight of what it must be like to love God, truly. It was only a glimpse, but it was like stumbling on fresh water in the desert, like remembering something so huge and extraordinary that my memory has been unable to contain it. Though God was nowhere to be seen clearly, nowhere to be clearly heard; I had to be near him... I loved him because there was nothing else left. I loved him because he

seemed to have made himself as helpless in his might as I was in my helplessness. I loved him not so much in spite of there being nothing in it for me, but almost because there was nothing in it for me. For the first time in my life, there in that wilderness, I caught what it must be like to love God truly, for his own sake, to love him, no matter what.

Frederick Buechner did not love God because he was some sort of saint or hero. He did not love God because suddenly he “saw the light.” He did not love God because he hoped that by loving God, it might persuade God to heal his dear friend. He loved God because he simply could do nothing else. He couldn’t help himself.

Life pushes us to know more, to understand more deeply, to engage the questions beyond simplistic responses, to struggle with unfulfilled promises and personal failures and disappointments with God and the church. To live life more humanly and humanely, we need to grow.

When we live out our love of God at the gate, in our social lives, sometimes we are driven back to the heart. We discover new depths of what it means to love God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all of our might.

There is an old Hasidic anecdote that says: “It is not within our power to place the divine teachings directly in someone else’s heart. All we can do is place them on the surface of the heart so that when the heart breaks, they will drop in.”

So often the Christian assumption is that faith is the acquisition of a set of beliefs or it comes in an instantaneous process, that one either has it or doesn’t have it. The standard of faith development for so much of the church is “conversion.” A person is an unbelieving reprobate one moment and then is transformed into a moral and ethical saint the next. The reality is that faith typically grows at the knee of parents and grandparents, nurtured over a lifetime.

The Apostle Paul is one of those we think of as a dramatic convert. On the road to Damascus, he was persecuting the church one moment and then converting Gentiles the next. Nothing could be further from the truth. In writing to the

Galatians, Paul indicates he spent fourteen years in preparation before entering ministry. Fourteen years! (Galatians 1:13-2:1)

What was he doing during those years? Maybe he was learning what it meant to follow Jesus Christ; perhaps he was learning what it meant to love God and neighbor, even those with whom he disagreed; maybe he was clarifying the message and life of Jesus Christ in his heart and in his mind and in his way of life lived out in the marketplace.

Faithful congregations implement practices where two or three, or ten or twelve, gather in Jesus' name and discover his presence among them which leads and guides and deepens their faith and their love of neighbor. Bible studies and prayer groups, mission endeavors and fellowship, whether it is two or eighty-two, we build our faith bit by bit, block by block, encounter by encounter, until at last we are fully formed into the body and image of Christ.

Do you want more of this for First Presbyterian Church? Do you want to intentionally grow in your faith? Do you want to be a part of a group or study? Speak to the pastors, provide input to the Mission Study Committee, visit with leaders of the church. Let's continue to grow as we follow Jesus Christ! This interim period is a perfect time for you to begin speaking about your hopes and needs in learning to love God between the heart and the gate.