Oct. 29, 2023

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

Matthew 22:34-46

As I think about our scriptures today what speaks to me is that both passages are in a way about endings. Moses’ ending, of course, is more apparent. For those bible nerds out there, this is a passage often pointed to as evidence that Moses wasn’t indeed the author of the Torah, as tradition suggests. After all, it would be difficult for him to write down the details of his own death. It’s also somewhat notable as a passage because while it lauds Moses as a “prophet among prophets” it also points to a promised land that Moses will see, but never enter. He’s led the people there through trials and tribulations over 40 years of wilderness wanderings, showing “mighty deeds and terrifying displays of power,” but is denied access himself as a punishment for a past infraction, which itself is biblically dubious. I’ve chased down the explanations, and I find them lacking, to be honest. My best thought is that Moses – unquestioningly faithful and heroic – died before leading the people into the holy land, and the author of the text before us needed an explanation that still left God in charge, so that’s how he wrote it. Regardless, as you dig into it one thing you find is that whether it’s punishment or not, Moses isn’t upset or deterred. In all his dialogues with God we never find a back and forth contesting the situation. Instead, Moses is far more concerned with forging forward in service to God and God’s people.

The *ending* in Matthew’s passage about Jesus is what we’re told by Matthew when Christ finishes his exchange with the Pharisees. “Nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.” He had been exchanging words with Sadducees, Herodians, scribes, and Pharisees. Each, in their own ways, has been testing him, trying to trap him in his words and discredit him. And of course, in all of these conversations he comes out on top. His accusers are silenced, or awed, or made to look foolish. But, this is the last of these conversations. We’ve come to the end of this kind of dialogue. The transition marks a new clarity for those who oppose him and new voice for Jesus as he addresses his disciples. He launches into two chapters of teachings and a long list of “woes” to religious leaders for their hypocrisies, for their control tactics, for their Godless faiths, for their lack of charity, for the obstacles they place before the people they guide. His long lesson concludes with the prediction that in two days he will be handed over and crucified. Matthew’s narration concurs, “Then the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered in the palace of the High Priest, and they conspired to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him.”

So, our passages have me thinking about absences and endings, while thinking also about these two love commandments upon which our whole entire faith seems to hinge. “Love God and love your neighbor as yourself.” The two are alike, says Jesus, which to my way of thinking means they are related and connected. At the very least I would say that if you love God with all of your heart, soul, and mind, any inclination within you to disregard your neighbor or yourself will be challenged. And, conversely, if you are good at loving your neighbor, and if you are a kind friend to yourself, I imagine you aren’t far from a love for God or at least from notions of a God who is lovable.

But, the truth is, as we all know, that fulfilling these two related commandments is easier said than done. And in fact, it seems to me that it’s getting harder. Our country is increasingly polarized and those two poles are increasingly willing to resort even to violence, according to a recent NPR story, to defend their sides. Almost in response to the very productive and healthy community conversation that we had here in Trumbull last Saturday on policing, race relations, and living in cooperation with one another, racist and antisemitic hate literature was immediately found on windshields in Trumbull and Monroe parking lots. Given Wednesday’s horrific mass shooting we can expect to be reminded once again how far we are as a population from any political solutions to gun violence. And of course, there’s war, waging on in Ukraine and moving forward in Israel and Gaza, and on top of all the death and destruction there’s the reminder that God’s people everywhere are so far from seeing eye to eye.

I keep thinking about an interview I saw on the news. It was with an Israeli woman whose son was killed by Hamas terrorists at the concert on Oct. 7. The part of the interview that I saw covered the absolute despair and soul killing loss she felt. The part I missed covered her almost unbelievable love of neighbor in sheltering a Palestinian family that was fleeing the destruction of their community. I don’t know how it came to happen or any more than what I’ve said, but I keep thinking about this woman and wondering how she could love at a time like that. I wonder if you asked her – if you set it up as a theoretical scenario, could she manage such love? Who knows, but no one would hold it against her after such a loss if she were to say no.

But, that’s the thing: we don’t really know the love we are capable of until it is asked of us. In Christian faith we too often assume wrongly that we’re left to our own devices, that if we’re going to live up to what God asks of us it is by our own strength and determination that we do it. In fact, that was my one criticism of the musical, “The Twelve” that a few of us saw earlier this month. The disciples were huddled in hiding after Christ’s crucifixion. There was fear and confusion and uncertainty about what the whole journey with Jesus meant and what they were supposed to do next. Then came news that the tomb in which he’d been buried was empty. The stone was gone and so was Jesus. Some were skeptical but to others it meant that his message mattered, that the love he professed was God’s truth, that it was now their mission to pick up where he left off.

But, the Christian message is more than that because the end of Christ’s story is not his death. In fact, resurrection means that there is no end to his story. Christ rises so that we might rise with him. Christ lives so that we might have life in him. It’s not that he’s risen and gone; it’s that he’s risen and given. We aren’t alone. We aren’t the body of Christ removed from his living Spirit, though I think we act that way sometimes.

Moses, as you may recall, appears again in the gospels. He’s there momentarily on the mountain top in the transfiguration of Jesus. Whatever it means, it’s a reminder that endings are different for God. Though in Deuteronomy Moses has come to his death, the story of God and God’s people goes on. In fact, you could imagine being one of them. You’ve reached the promised land. It’s there before you all laid out. A kind of fulfillment. A new kind of life. Yet, your leader is gone and you’ve been given a new one who you aren’t so sure about yet. You’re going to have to cross into that land with uncertainty. You are going to have to step out in faith. And, nobody can do it for you. All you can do is step and see what God does with you.

That’s the way I think it is with these two commandments of Jesus. In living them out we’ll always be stepping out into the unknown, into what we aren’t even sure we can do. But, however we might, we love. We love God and we love neighbor, and the miracle is that God is in that love. It becomes more than what we offered, and we become more than what we were.