

A LIFE WELL LIVED
A Sermon by
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Texts: Deuteronomy 34:1-12
Matthew 22:34-40

Wait ‘til next year. Year after year, fans file into the confines of Wrigley Field clinging to the hope that this could be their year...never mind that they’ve been hoping for over a century now. Honestly, I admire all of the Cubs fans here today. A St. Louis native from a family of huge Cardinal fans, I can’t quite put myself in your place. But I acknowledge that there is a certain tenacity and persistence about a true Cubbies fan that is unique. Just a few years ago, it looked as though all that persistence might pay off...

In 2003 the possibility for a Cubs World Series was real. They beat the Atlanta Braves to clinch the National League Division Series and then met the Florida Marlins at the National League Championships. The Cubs won three of the first four games in this series, getting the team so close to the World Series that they could taste it. Cubs’ fans went crazy! For the first time since 1908 their team had a chance! But it was not to be, for those three wins were the only wins the Cubs had in that series, ultimately losing to the Marlins. All of Chicago mourned this defeat. It was a devastating disappointment. And yet, come April Wrigley was filled with those same fans, clothed in the bright blue and white, touting that 2004 would be their teams’ year.

The fans remain faithful even after disappointment. Those are good fans! It is difficult to stand by a team, a person or even God, when they disappoint. Particularly when the disappointment is not just a game but is a real life tragedy...relationship loss, illness or even death. It is challenging to remain faithful to God when God disappoints. In Apple founder Steve Jobs’ autobiography that is due out this week he writes that he lost his faith in God when he was 13 and he learned about the starving children in Africa. He wondered, why does a God who allows such atrocity deserve my faith? His answer was that God doesn’t.

It is very difficult to have faith in God when disappointment happens, and the mystery of “why?” is not answered. It is difficult for me, I imagine that at times it is difficult for each person in this Sanctuary, and it was difficult even for Moses. And yet, Moses stood by God until his final day. In our Hebrew Scriptures passages for this morning, we read of Moses’ death. Moses’ life has spanned the four of the five books within the Torah: Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. He has figured prominently in almost every story contained therein.

He has led the Israelites for 40 years, out of slavery in Egypt, to Mt. Sinai, through many trials, and now they stand at the cusp of the Promised Land, about to enter into the promise God made so many generations ago to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Moses has been God’s faithful servant and now, at the end of his life, when they have come to the promised land, God says no: “I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.” (34:4)

So close, yet so far away. Scholars have long been baffled at this denial by God. A possible explanation is found in Numbers where Moses is reprimanded by God for showing lack of trust in God's providence to the Israelites, "'Because you did not trust in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them.'" But, in today's passages, Moses receives unparalleled praise: , "Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face" (34:10). It seems odd that the greatest prophet should not be allowed in to the land that was promised. Perhaps Moses could not go the land because of the sins of the Israelites. It is not clear. What we know is that Moses was permitted only to *see* the promised land.

In this passage, as one commentator points out, we find Moses in a now-and-not-yet-time. For his life, Moses has lived with the promise of this land, given to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and to all of their descendents. Now at the end of his life, he has arrived at the land...almost. He experiences a promise revealed but not realized (Schifferdecker, 10.20.11). How very disappointing, but also, how very possible. How often do our dreams cease to become realities...because the illness sets in, because the bills become too much, because our time runs out? I'd venture to say that dreams are deferred as often as they are not. The question is, where does that leave our faith? Honestly, we don't know how the disappointment left Moses, as soon after he saw the land he died. But we do know that he is not alone in living in a now and not yet time, and that he, like his forefathers, was faithful to God during his life.

As is written in Hebrews:

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God....All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them.(11:8-10, 13)

All of these died in faith...and lived in faith. As Moses, although reluctantly at first, followed God call to leadership he did so out of fear, and love for the Lord. He lived out the commandment God shared with the Israelites through him: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. 5 You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut 6:5).

Love God. Ordained Presbyterian minister, writer and poet Frederick Buechner reflects that this commandment is anything but easy: "We have heard the words so often that we no longer hear them. They are too loud to hear, too big to take in. We know the words so much *by* heart that we scarcely know them any longer as words spoken *to* the heart out of a mystery beyond all knowing." He continues, "We take the words so much for granted that we hardly stop to wonder where they are seeking to take us. And unfortunately, "The words don't explain. They just proclaim and command" (2006 99).

A commandment that was as challenging to the Israelites in the wilderness as it was to the faithful Jews century upon century later when Jesus answered the lawyers' question as it is to us today. Love God. But how? The second commandment is easier to understand, "love your neighbor as yourself." Not easy, by any means, but concrete. Loving God is a bit more abstract. How do we love God whom we cannot see? How do we focus our heart, mind and soul on the Holy One when we are so distracted by one another? How do we love what is beyond our comprehension? Hard questions. Questions with no one right answer.

I wonder if showing our love for God isn't *that* different from the ways we show our love to one another. Marriage counselor Gary Chapman expertly guides couples as they identify the ways that they best receive each other's love. Chapman's bestselling book *The Five Love Languages* describes five key categories for the countless ways we show affection and helps people name what they need to experience love. These languages are: Words of Affirmation, Quality Time, Receiving Gifts, Acts of Service, and Physical Touch.

Chapman asserts that showing love in a language that the other person understands is key to a successful relationship. For years couples have struggled in their relationship not because they don't love one another but because they are showing it in a language the other doesn't understand. In many relationships, simply learning the right language is the catalyst to feeling fulfilled and happy.

Employing these languages in showing our affection to God might just be the way to make the abstract command 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' (Matthew 22: 37) concrete enough that we can follow it. In many instances, as a community we are already speaking these languages. We offer Words of Affirmation through our singing of hymns, our prayers, and this day for seven in our number, becoming members in our community...we offer quality time through our worship...we offer gifts during the offertory and throughout our weeks as we share our talents...and we offer acts of service through our ministry outreach, such as participation in Family Promise, whose families arrive this evening. We offer physical touch to God through our celebration of the Sacraments, last week through the cleaning waters of baptism as we welcomed Max Stump into the church, and at the beginning of each month as we celebrate the Lord's Supper.

In each of these ways we are loving God. The question remains though...how do we love God beyond these church walls? Beyond our church activities? On our own?

In the same ways. We offer words of affirmation through prayers...whether they be written, sung, drawn or even muttered in haste. As irreverent Christian writer Anne Lemott says, her two favorite prayers are "Help me, Help me, Help me" and "Thank you, Thank you, Thank you." Perhaps most difficult during the hustle and bustle of the week, we give God quality time. That can mean reading a book, taking a quiet walk in the beauty of God's Creation or talking to God over a cup of coffee. Whatever it means for each of us, what is important is that we do it. On a regular basis.

We can offer God's gifts as we do acts of service, for the acts *are* the gifts. When we prepare a meal for a person who needs it, when we volunteer for family promise, when we visit a neighbor or loved one in the hospital we are showing our love for God as we love one another. We also give financially to the church to further the work of God. We do this as we acknowledge that all we have is from God- given out of God's love for us- and we respond back with love by giving a portion of that back to God. In this stewardship season, I urge you to really think about this love language and how you will speak it. Finally, we offer God physical touch when we embrace the Holy Spirit's presence. When we offer our hand to another who needs our support, when we give a hug to another who is hurt, when we pass the peace with one another.

Unlike us, God is not particular about which language we use to illustrate our love, God is happy with any of them! God just wants to receive our love...every day. Not just from 9:30-10:45 on Sunday morning. As Buechner comments, "It is not easy to love God with all your heart, and soul and mind when much of the time you have all but forgotten his name" (2006 105). To make it easier for us to love God, I am giving all us a challenge for the week. To employ any of these love languages *each day* with God. To make this challenge more real, I urge you to tell your partner or friend one of the ways you will do this, so that they might hold you accountable. Friends, this is important. To Love God, with all our heart mind and soul, is God's greatest commandment to us. In keeping it, we make God the center of our lives and, like Moses, experience a life well lived. Disappointments will come and go and dreams might be deferred, but as we demonstrate our love to God and grow in our relationship with God, our faith remains through it all. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Works Cited

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- Schifferdecker, Kathryn. 2011. "Deuteronomy 34: 1-12" from *Working Preacher* website. Accessed 10.20.11 at <http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx>.