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“Keeping the Vision”

Deuteronomy 34:1 – 12

Matthew 34:34 - 40

Text: The Lord said to Moses, “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.” . . . Deuteronomy 34:4
“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” . . . Matthew 22:39

What is your vision? What drives you? What is it that keeps you going?

For Moses it was to lead the Israelites out of slavery and into the Promised Land. It was a long hard struggle for Moses; especially the 40 years in the wilderness, dealing with people who could not keep their mind on the same vision. The murmured against him and they made false gods.

And in today’s Lesson from Deuteronomy we find that near the end of the 40 years in the wilderness when Moses was a robust 120 years of age, he went up to the top of Mount Nebo and was shown the promised land – and God told Moses, “I will give it to your descendents; I have let you see it with your own eyes, but you shall not cross over there.”

Moses despite many trials and tribulations, kept the vision and the promise he made to be God’s follower. Today’s lesson concludes with a eulogy for Moses, “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 deed and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.”

Would that we would all be able to have both the vision and the faithfulness of Moses.

And today we also have a second story of vision.

But first, let me set the context.

When I was growing up, it seemed that all the songs started with nonsense syllables. One of my favorites began with “Na na na Na na na Na na.” Perhaps you remember that song. It was “The Games People Play,” and the words went like this:

Oh the games people play now
Every night and every day now
Never meaning what they say now
Never saying what they mean.

Oh they whine away the hours
In their ivory towers

Til they're covered up with flowers
In the back of a black limousine

Oh they make one another cry
Break their hearts and they say good-bye
Cross their heart and they hope to die
That the other was to blame

Neither one will ever give in
So they gaze at an eight by ten
Thinkin' 'bout the way it might have been
And it's a dirty rotten shame

Our text for today deals with the games that the Pharisees were playing with Jesus. The Pharisees come to Jesus once again with a question designed to do damage to the reputation of Jesus. And once again Jesus proves he is equal to the task. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" Now, even though this question was used to test Jesus, it is nonetheless an important question. Perhaps in the life of Israel at that time it was THE most important question. After all, it is a vision type of question – what drives what you do?

Which law is the greatest? It's not surprising that during Jesus' time the bible experts, known as the Pharisees, looked for a way to summarize the teachings of Moses and the Prophets. Now how in the world do you summarize such a collection? Can it really be done? Jesus seems to indicate that it can when he says, all the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments: First, love God with all you heart, soul, and mind; and secondly, love your neighbor as yourself.

Now it might surprise you to learn that Jesus was not the first person to bring these two commandments together as a summary. Others had already done this. If you look at this teaching in Luke you will see that it is the Lawyer who summarizes the Law in this way and not Jesus. So this is not unique to Jesus. What is significant here is Jesus' small but powerful statement at the end. He says, "All the Law (that's the first five books of the Old Testament) and the Prophets (that's most of the rest of the Old Testament) hang on these two commandments."

There is something within us that wants to be told what to do rather than how to be. There would have been a certain satisfaction in knowing exactly those things we must do to fulfill the law. But there is a danger here. The law confines us and makes us judgmental of others. If on the other hand we are guided to love then there is a freedom, because love is based on relationship.

You see . . . law is not enough. Law tells us what we have to do and when we have done wrong. Love, on the other hand, tells us who we can be. Over these 613 statutes of the Law stand these two obligations in our relationship with Yahweh: Love God and love your neighbor. We can be left alone with the law or we can be left alone with God. I chose to be left alone with God. That is the vision of Jesus; is it the vision of this church?

We are moving rapidly into our Centennial Year. Next October 14 (2012) we will have a wonderful worship service to commemorate 100 years as the Chevy Chase United Methodist Church. It is important to remember the vision that our founding members had. They started in a barn on what is now Williams Street; they outgrew the barn and bought a small wood frame church on this present location. We bought it from the Baptist church that now resides on Western Avenue. Then in 1934 they built the first sanctuary, now our Chapel, then in 1935 an education wing and when that grew too crowded they held classes in the house that is now the parsonage. Then came the big vision to build a sanctuary. But times were tough in the late forties, so in 1949 they began with a Parish hall (now called Phillips Hall), and a few short years later in 1953 the Sanctuary was begun and consecrated on November 7, 1954. By 1961 the education and office wing was consecrated. Then a preschool began; and in the late 80's and early 90's the church realized it needed to provide handicap accessibility. All along the way there was a vision of what this church could be. The more compelling the vision the more doable the project became.

I invite you to think of it this way. In I Corinthians 13 there are the very familiar words: "so faith, hope, and love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love." Harrell Beck outstanding preacher and professor of Old Testament at Boston University School of Theology explained it to me this way: *faith* comes from the history and the remembered events of a community. It provides a foundation for *hope* which gives us a vision of the future. But it is *love* that exists in the present acts of a people that combines the foundations of the past – *faith* with the hope for the future – *hope* into the actions of the people of God in the very present.

But where is our vision now? Where is the love that combines the faith of our history with the hope for our future? What bold new task is God setting before us that will enable us to act in love? In the Highlights (our Newsletter) between now and next October there will be articles by various committees and interest groups sharing with you some of their visions of our future as a faith community. Some of those will come from the Youth, Missions, the Green Team, worship, education, and others.

One of those visions comes from our Stewardship Committee. This year their theme is "Our Centennial: It's Not About Us." What a forward thinking statement! What we do now in the church shapes the future. What the future brings only God will decide. But it rests on the vision of Jesus in two statements, "Love your neighbor as yourself" and the Great Commission "Go therefore and make disciples (or be disciples) of all the nations." Which, when you stop and think about it points us outside to others. Notice how those two vision statements point toward opening our doors to people who are not now a part of our church. It is the same forward thinking that our founders must have had when they anticipated a growing church. If they only thought about themselves they would have never needed to grow out of that barn! No, they wanted to grow and help spread the Gospel to more and more people.

But there is another side of this as well that points to our stewardship program for next year. For many years churches all over the world wait to build the church budget on

the basis of the Stewardship Campaign. On first blush this sounds like good business practice. Find out how much money you are going to have and then build your budget accordingly. But show me where faith is exercised in that practice.

Consider the example of a person owning a small business that employs 20 people. How does the business person decide how many people to hire? On what basis? The answer is fairly straight forward – it is not a “fixed in stone, we’ve always hired 20 people”; but rather a fluid decision based on anticipated business and either projected growth or decline depending on the current business environment. The key word there is “anticipated”. In other words, the small business owner has to employ some measured basis of “faith” that a certain amount of business will come in so that business person will know how many people to hire.

This year the Stewardship Committee, led very capably by Jay Fryer, wants us to use a vision based on faith not on the basis of meeting our budget. This is not as unusual as you may think. Most Stewardship experts tell us that our Stewardship campaigns should either be ongoing – 12 months a year; or if done at one time about six months separated from the budget building cycle. Why?

Because our Stewardship response should be solely a response to what God has given us. It should be a returning to God some portion of what God has already given to you. Your giving to the church should not be based on your “fair share” of building a pre-determined budget, but hopefully because you feel richly blessed by God and God has taught us that what we have is not to be hoarded but rather shared – whether it be love, the talents with which we have been blessed, or the money we have accumulated as the result of our God-given talents. It is from our abundance that we give; because our God is the God of abundance. It is a God that tells us in the words from Matthew 6 “Do not be anxious, saying, ‘what shall we eat?’ or ‘what shall we drink?’ or ‘what shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek all these things; and Your God knows that you need them all. But seek first God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.” (Matthew 6:31-33)

So as we enter this unofficial season of the church year known as Stewardship season, let us act on faith to “seek ye first the kingdom of God”. Let us remember that this place called church is not all about us, but rather it is “to go therefore and make disciples of all nations!” When we do this, God will richly bless us, and give us all that we need.