

GRANDPARENTS

Deuteronomy 6:1-9, 20-25; II Timothy 1:1-7

I am always grateful for the opportunity to preach in the Lake Shore pulpit; thank you for the invitation. I am also aware of the responsibility involved in preaching in this pulpit. I often think that the sermons I would hope to preach have in one way or another already been preached in this place.

The starting place of the sermon today is the perspective that grandparents – grandmothers and grandfathers – have as their primary function to help grandchildren to remember. Grandparents are an active antidote to the amnesia that grandchildren readily practice. I would also suggest that our society is currently enduring a frightful epidemic of amnesia. Are there grandparents among us who can help us remember? Of course, some of you who know me will realize that the starting place of the sermon today is really that I became a grandparent nearly seven months ago, (It will be seven months on Tuesday.) and the lovely Charley Marie Bellinger sits here on the second row with her parents and grandmother. So being a grandparent has been on my mind, and in

the pictures Libby and I have shown you. Grandparenting may be quite personal in reminding grandchildren to put on shoes before going out to catch lizards or not to chew electrical cords or not to eat the bark of a tree.

Grandparents helping grandchildren to remember may also take on a broader significance. Grandparents remember and recite a family's story with its wonders and oddities and embarrassments and jokes, all of which help us in forming our identities. Grandparents tell about aunts and uncles so grandchildren can come to understand that they are part of a network that connects and that grandchildren are not alone or forgotten or misplaced. Grandparents remind grandchildren of a family's moral code, hopefully not in an authoritarian way. Grandchildren inherit sets of expectations in families. I realize that all of these opportunities to remember can go awry. I can remember that Uncle Shaylor was funny when he was dull or that Aunt Oline was polite when she was blunt. I don't think I need to go further; you get that point. At its best, however, grandparents' remembering stories and connections and expectations flow into the hope that grandchildren can imbibe a sense of belonging.

That is Paul's point in his expression of thanksgiving for Timothy and his faith, read earlier by Ross, and how that faith was cherished and remembered and passed on by his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice and now lives in the grandchild Timothy in a spirit of power and love and self-discipline. And now Timothy can remember and tell this gospel story of faith. The grandparents I knew were my maternal grandparents, with stereotypical southern names of Flossie May and William Vander Walters. I am grateful to remember their practical spirituality and their commitment to the centrality of the local church. They were the kind of faithful folk people love to have care for them and pray for them.

And in turn something of grandparents remembering and passing on to grandchildren the story of the faith is a way to think about what is happening in the book of Deuteronomy, a story of faith centered in the exodus. In chapter 10, the one who spoke in the bush that burned but was not consumed says to Moses, "Go to Pharaoh in order that I may create signs among the Egyptians and in order that you may tell your children and grandchildren how I have made fools of the Egyptians and

what signs I did among them, in order that you may know that I am the Lord.” This God does signs and wonders so you may tell your grandchildren and realize that this one, this Yahweh, is the one Lord, the one God whom Israel is to love with all they are and have, that is to live a life of integrity or wholeness. And this God makes the Egyptians look silly. Remember that the Egyptians are the oppressors and they need to realize that they do not control the life of this immigrant community named Israel. That is the prerogative of but one – the living God.

It is my custom to emphasize the joys of reading the Older Testament, but I must say that I find Deuteronomy to be a real challenge here. I tend to think of it as a long, long law book. But this perspective on Deuteronomy helps me. It is cast as Moses’ last will and testament before Israel is to enter the land across the Jordan. So we can see it as the Grandparent Moses inviting the children and grandchildren to remember the family’s or community’s story and where they all fit together in this community and the hopes of how they will live. Israel’s theologians in the voice of Moses help the grandchildren to remember. Underlying Deuteronomy is the concern that grandchildren practice

amnesia. Moses says repeatedly, “When you come into the land of prosperity, do not forget!” It is a land flowing with milk and honey, a land with fine cities and houses, with water and wine and olive groves and fine foods and prosperity you did not create; do not forget the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. Do not forget the Lord your God. Do not forget the Lord your God; you remember by living as a community in faithful relationship with God and neighbor.

The last paragraph of Deuteronomy 6 tells the story with the grandparent helping the generations to remember how the living God of Israel with a mighty hand and great and even awesome signs and wonders brought this community out of the house of oppressive human trafficking and slavery into the land beyond the Jordan to new life together. But there is a bit more to tell of the story. It goes even back to the midwives Shiphrah and Puah in Exodus 1 who were clever women of faith and who made the Pharaoh, the leader of that world’s most powerful military industrial complex, look foolish when they preserved alive Israel’s babies and it goes back to Moses who hesitantly took

courage and, along with brother Aaron and sister Miriam faced down that Pharaoh and all the Egyptian gods. It goes back to this living God who hears the cry of this oppressed, displaced people and comes and brings them into hope. It goes back to the struggle to liberate this immigrant community with signs and wonders and guide them through wilderness to hope. And in a remarkable move of grammar in that last paragraph of Deuteronomy 6, the voice of the grandparent does not say that the Lord brought that generation from Egypt and we continue the story. No, the text says, “God brought **us** out of Egypt; **we** were slaves there.” The grandparents and the children and the grandchildren have all now entered the story and can remember it and tell it and live it.

The concern behind all this remembering, of course, is that the grandchildren will forget. Forget and you will have no courageous midwives who challenge power. Forget and you will have a world with no burning bush and no holy interruption and no surprise of newness and mystery but only a narcotic of comfort. Forget and you will have a society with those who are lost and enslaved and no one to protest. Forget and you will have a settled faith and a settled community

incapable of laughing at the brute force of the amnesia that runs roughshod over the cries of need. Forget and you will have a numbed and private nostalgia that imagines comfortable and oppressive power to be good for all. The grandparent voice in Deuteronomy proclaims that it does not have to be so. Rather, remember and live fully in relationship with the living God in the community of God's people, a life of wholeness and integrity. The book of Deuteronomy recites the history of God's people Israel and does so with a constant eye to the present, to "today."

And so I remind us "today" that the faith passed down from Lois and Eunice lived in Timothy. The faith remembered by Moses and Aaron and Miriam lived in later generations of faithful prophets and priests and wisdom teachers. I would suggest that at times we all function as grandparents and as grandchildren. We all forget and we all help each other to remember. I have enjoyed having the orange ribbon on my car's side mirror this week. It has continued to remind me of Pentecost and the presence of the Spirit. "Oh, yes, Pentecost; it continues." Deuteronomy 6 prescribes continuing to talk about the life

of faith and carrying instruction for it on our hands and heads and having it on our doors. These things are to remind the community that we are connected, that we live our faith, and that we have a story. Today is Trinity Sunday, perhaps not one of the holy days that immediately come to our minds. It is perhaps ironic on Trinity Sunday to read the Shemah from Deuteronomy 6:4 (Hebrew) “Hear, O Israel. The Lord is our God; the Lord is one.” But maybe the story of the congregation of Israel can help us remember that this one God is in the creation, is incarnated in Jesus the Christ, and is embodied in the work of the Spirit in Christians and in the church. Lest we forget, Deuteronomy reminds us of the invitation of the grandparent Moses to live fully and calls for that invitation to be in our conversations and worship and in our witness in the world. Our story is about caring for God’s creation in this building even and in the wider world; our story is about living as disciples of Christ; our story embraces the reality that we do not control the world but rather seek to embody the Spirit’s hope in an era marked by pain and anxiety.

The story helps us remember our hope that God has not left us alone but has caringly placed us in communities of Christ and has given us the Spirit as our guide. Today, when we are a community in transition, looking ahead and wondering and we as persons are looking ahead and wondering, I hope as grandparents, children, and grandchildren, we remember that the Lord our God is with us and that we are persuasively invited to embody God's good news in this place and in this time, to live in wholeness and integrity and so continue the story. In the words of Deuteronomy, "Choose life so that you and your grandchildren may fully live." Amen.