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September 9, 2007

Spiritual Legacy

Deuteronomy 30:19

The head of the Engineering Department of Virginian Tech University was interviewed by National Public Radio last week. Professor Pori was asked if it is difficult going to work every day in a building where some of his colleagues and his students had died. He answered that being in that building reminds him of the fact that the people who died there are with him every day. Their continuing presence inspires him to pursue his vocation of teaching with greater discipline and deeper passion.

He went on to say that he had asked the university not to tear down this building or to convert it into a memorial. He said, "Let it be the living legacy of the people who died here. Let it do the work of educating students. That is what my fallen colleagues believed in. The best way to honor them is to build on their legacy." Professor Pori has come to terms with a terrible tragedy by remembering how much he is blessed by the legacy created by his fallen colleagues.

We find a similar message expressed in the 30th chapter of Deuteronomy. The present form of this chapter took shape as a message of hope to people who were living through a historic tragedy. The Babylonian exile resulted in the destruction of all the institutions of Jewish society. It was a time of disillusionment when people wondered if the God they worshiped still cared about them. In this chapter the people are challenged to look at their national disaster in a different way. They are invited to remember the covenant their ancestors made with God under Moses' leadership centuries before. The exiles are asked to remember how much they have been blessed by that covenant. The legacy created by that covenant still lives in their hearts. That is the resource that can get them through the terrible times in which they live. It empowers them to invest in the future by passing on the spiritual legacy they have received. The words of Moses from centuries earlier are directed to them:

I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendents may live (Deuteronomy 30:19).

What they do in exile has far reaching implications for future generations. These generations to come will be blessed or cursed by the decisions the exiles made.

The power of a spiritual legacy can be seen in what happened in this church more than 100 years ago. There were many who questioned the church's decision to sell its downtown building in 1906 which led to a year and a half in exile. Services were held on Sunday afternoons at First Presbyterian and then at Central Baptist. Many wondered if the church could survive under these trying circumstances. It was a time when members of this church had to be clear about their loyalties and dare to invest in the future. When we gather on Sunday mornings we know we are blessed by their spiritual legacy. We are also reminded of our calling to build on that legacy to bless generations to come.

You may remember that in a recent sermon I reported the discovery of a secret which had been buried in my family for more than 100 years. My great-great grandfather, David Ewing, and his second wife had been cut off by their church in 1850 when a daughter was born only four months after their marriage. I have been continuing to pursue this story to understand the impact of this excommunication

on the family. This was a blended family with four children from David Ewing's first marriage, including my great-grandmother who was only a month old when her mother died. Three children came with the widow David married. Three more children were born to the new marriage but they did not survive more than a few years.

The church records show that most if not all of the surviving children became members of the Reformed Presbyterian congregation that cut off their parents. Memberships are recorded for each between the ages of eleven and thirteen. But the most revealing entry was in the pledge records of the church. Every year each active family would make a pledge to support the salary of the pastor. Because my great-great grandfather was cut off he never appears on this list. But when his children joined their names begin to show up on the pledge list. In some years there are as many as four teenagers each making an adult level pledge. It is clear that their father was paying those pledges. That means that during some of those years David Ewing was the largest contributor to the ministry of the congregation. The church had given up on him, but he never gave up on the church.

David Ewing's exile lasted 30 years. In 1880 he was received once again into the membership of the Reformed Presbyterian Church. His exile from the church was a time to clarify his loyalties. He used that exile to make sure that future generations would be blessed by the spiritual legacy that he had received. His grandson, who was my grandfather, was an elder in the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Sterling, Kansas. He may have been the one who buried the secret, but he had learned from it, too. He often said to his grandchildren, "The covenant of grace belongs to you."

I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendents may live (Deuteronomy 30:19).