

Sermon – Be the Change  
Sunday, October 29, 2017  
Scripture: Deuteronomy 34:1-12, I Thessalonian 2:1-8  
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Our first scripture reading is Deuteronomy 34:1-12. These are the final words within the Hebrew Torah, which consists of the first five books of the Old Testament, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Moses has led the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt, formed their identity in the desert, and presented the Ten Commandments to guide their new life in the Promised land. However, Moses will not cross over with them. It was a sad day for the Hebrew people when their leader Moses died. Listen for God's Word.

*1 Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the Lord showed him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan, 2 all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, 3 the Negeb, and the Plain—that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees—as far as Zoar. 4 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." 5 Then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord's command. 6 He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day. 7 Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated. 8 The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended. 9 Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on Joshua; and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the Lord had commanded Moses. 10 Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. 11 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, 12 and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel. Amen.*

Our second Scripture reading is I Thessalonians 2:1-8. This is Paul's first letter and the oldest existing New Testament document. We sense a closeness and affection between Paul and his congregation. Paul talks of the importance of courage and integrity within the Apostles, the early Christian leaders, however, what is as important is the relationship. The apostle is not a powerful and authoritarian figure, for Paul, as much as one who serves alongside God's people, risking vulnerability so that the truth of the gospel may be made known. Paul leads first century Christians much like Moses led the Israelites into the promised land. Hear now the words of Paul.

*1 You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, 2 but though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition. 3 For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, 4 but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts. 5 As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; 6 nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, 7 though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. 8 So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us. Amen.*

The title of the sermon: Be the Change

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, we thank you for the gift of leadership and for those who call forth positive change within our lives as we come into our own. And now, may the words of my mouth and the thoughts and meditations of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

*Reformed and always reforming...* As we celebrate the Reformation and dedicate our 2018 Stewardship pledges on this milestone anniversary we honor the rich history of our protestant faith and those who had the courage to be the change.

In the giving of our financial resources we become a part of something larger than our individual lives and we partake in the privilege of positive change in this time and place. We come into our own when we give of ourselves in meaningful and intentional ways. We come into our own when the faith that those who came before us have nurtured within us becomes a part of who we are and the way we live our lives.

When Peter and I visited our son Paul at Tulane Law School in New Orleans a few weeks ago I enjoyed perusing his bookshelves and the books he chose to take with him which reflect who he is becoming. Many were gifts from family and mentors over the years with topics ranging from environment law “Getting to Green” to the biography of legendary basketball coach John Wooden.

When we returned to Springfield I found another book gifted to Paul which I had borrowed and forgot to return. Within its pages was a note written by the Rev. Dr. Belden Lane. Belden is a Presbyterian minister and Professor Emeritus of Theological Studies at St. Louis University, a Roman Catholic Jesuit School. Belden preached at my Installation Service in Westminster’s pulpit four years ago. Dr. Lane attended Webster Groves Presbyterian Church and was in worship the Sunday Paul was ordained as a youth elder. He wrote:

*Dear Paul, Your ordination as a ruling elder was very meaningful to me. It was 40 years ago that I was ordained myself at our first church in the little town of Ellicottville, New York. Laying my hands on your head in church, I was taken back to that experience —asking that God pour out on your life many of the blessings that have been given to me through the years.*

*I wrote my dissertation on what it means to be a ruling elder. My most recent book (a copy of which I’ve enclosed Ravished by Beauty: The Surprising Legacy of Reformed Spirituality) is an effort to capture the rich mystery of what it means to be a Presbyterian. Too often Calvinists have been scorned as a sour people with a rigid, almost cruel and other-worldly God. But this is hardly the case. The tradition you serve is full of passion, beauty, and an endearing love of the earth. I hope you can fall in love with it as I have myself.*

*This book is not an easy read. Your mother may even find it more interesting right now. But I give it to you as a promise of what I know you yourself will come to love. Warmest wishes to you, my friend, now and throughout your life. Belden*

The tradition of the laying on of hands has its roots in the Torah which we read today. Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, laid his hands on Joshua passing the torch of leadership before his death which was a devastating loss for the Hebrew people. He had been a leader

who like the Apostle Paul, risked his own self in vulnerability time and time again as he led the Hebrew people through the wilderness on their homeward journey to the Promised Land.

The Hebrew people crossed the Jordan River without their beloved mentor Moses. Surely, he was with them in spirit and it was Moses who had a part in forming them into God's people, making their crossing possible. However, they crossed over on their own and there is great symbolism in this crossing. It highlights the importance of each of us coming into our own. There are certain things in life we can only do for ourselves. By doing so we honor the mentors in our lives who have shaped our character and identity, who have led us with gentleness and strength, who have kept us accountable, who have embraced us, and who want nothing more than for us to come into our own.

When a sincere, young priest named Martin Luther nailed 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany on the Hallowed Eve of All Saint's Day 1517 (500 years ago), he was coming into his own and initiating change and accountability within the church he loved and served. *Luther was concerned with the selling of indulgences, certificates believed to lessen the punishment of sin committed by the purchasers themselves or their loved ones in Purgatory. In the Theses, Luther claimed the repentance required by Christ in order for sins to be forgiven involves inner spiritual repentance rather than merely external sacramental confession. Grace cannot be purchased. According to Luther, indulgences also discouraged Christians from giving to the poor and performing other acts of mercy, believing that indulgence certificates were more spiritually valuable.* (Wikipedia)

Martin Luther initiated a change which eventually swept across Europe in the Reformation Movement. The intent of this change was to bring faith and spiritual integrity back to the people. Besides the selling of indulgences within the Roman Catholic Church, other factors that made this change possible was a growing nationalism within Europe as countries were gaining identity and coming into their own and a rebirth in philosophy, the arts and sciences that was a part of the Renaissance Period.

The four major tenants within the Reformation are:

First: Salvation through faith alone...forgiveness cannot be bought!

Second: Jesus Christ is the only Head of the Church...we follow our conscience rather than rules imposed by a hierarchical leadership.

Third: The Bible is the only infallible Word of God...the Creeds and Confessions we hold are subservient to Holy Scripture.

Fourth: The Priesthood of all believers...We are equal in God's eyes, church member, deacon, elder, and minister alike.

Today we give thanks for the courage and integrity of those who have come before us and who, like Moses and the Apostle Paul, were willing to lead by sharing their own selves to initiate positive change in the church. As we are the Church today and will be the Church tomorrow, may we honor the Reformers that have come before us and sustain the accountability, the insight, and the strength to change.... *reformed and always reforming.*

Today we give thanks for those mentors in each of our lives who have laid their hands upon us, who believe in us and our potential, and who call us to be the change. Amen.