

Deuteronomy 6:1-9

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Samantha Evans

October 20, 2019

## **Listen and Love**

Yesterday I had the pleasure of going to the James' house to celebrate Bob's 99<sup>th</sup> birthday. While I was there, I got to meet his cousin and her husband, and they shared with me that they had moved away quite some time ago, but they used to live in Willow Glen. And when they did, their mom lived right across the street from the Rev. Simpson. And they had all been among the first people to become members of Stone Church. Over 70 years ago.

As we were talking, I realized what an incredible gift it is to have folks like them, and Tab, and Hazel and Bob, and Fred, who have been around since the founding of this church and can provide a kind of living history. I am sure many of you have heard some of their stories. How they served in the second world war. How they were looking a place to raise their families. How they fell in love with Willow Glen and its \*then\* orchards. And how they built their homes. Their neighborhoods. And their (and our) church.

I am from the east coast. I transferred here from the Presbytery of Philadelphia, which just celebrated its 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary. And I grew up in a church in a small town in northwestern Pennsylvania, which held its first communion 210 years ago. There's quite a bit of written history during the founding of these churches and presbyteries, because there was a lot going on in the nation at that time and the church was at the center of it.

But it's just not the same as being able to sit with and hear directly from the people who were there: who ate the bread and drank the cup; who prayed and provided for those in need; who gathered to make difficult decisions; who casted a vision for this church and offered tithes to make it real.

This neighborhood and this church is their Promised Land, full of milk and honey, where they could come and plant roots and thrive. They, their children, and their children's children. And praise be to God that the founders of this place were faithful stewards and dedicated disciples. For today we continue to thrive in this place, continue to gather around the table to pray, to dream, and to discern what God is inviting us to do. And to make difficult decisions and sacrifices of time, talent, and money to make it happen.

We have heard the phrase that with great power or privilege comes great responsibility. And I always think about this phrase when I consider Scripture's account of the creation of Israel. When I consider what God did for these enslaved peoples, delivering them from Pharaoh; guiding them through the wilderness and providing for their every need; giving them Moses to comfort and teach them; and ultimately giving them a land flowing with milk and honey, a place of their own where they could truly thrive as individuals and eventually, as a nation.

This is really as powerful and privileged as it gets. Having the one true God, who can defeat Pharaoh, the God named, I am, who can bring water out of rocks, and bread from the skies. Having this God on your side is about as good as it gets.

And so with this much power and privilege, for the Israelites, comes a great deal of responsibility. God doesn't just give them this land and expect nothing back from them. God expects them to respond.

And so, God, through Moses, gives them this final exhortation as they are about to enter into this Promised Land. So that they might live and thrive and be God's faithful people.

These words became a foundational prayer for the people of Israel, which is recited day and night by Jews even today. It is called the *Shema*. This is a Hebrew word that means listen or hear, and it begins this phrase found here in Deuteronomy. In Hebrew, it goes:

*Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Ehad...*

*Sh'ma Yisrael:* Hear, O Israel

*Adonai Eloheinu:* The LORD is our God

*Adonai Ehad:* The LORD is one.

This is the foundational prayer and statement for the people of Israel as they are about to enter into their Promised Land. One scholar points out that this is such a grand act of grace. "After all of Israel's 'murmuring' in the wilderness and the golden calf incident... God invites the people to love as they have been loved; God recommits to love Israel no matter what."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William H. Willimon, "Pastoral Perspective on Deuteronomy 6:1-9," *Feasting on the Word: Year B*.

This is the listen part: Listen, O Israel, the LORD God is our God. What comes next is the “so what.” Because the LORD is our God no matter what, then, how shall we respond? But by loving the LORD God with our whole hearts, souls, and might. By marking every aspect of our lives with this love. And teaching it to our children. Binding it to our hands. Sticking it to their foreheads. Displaying it on every door and gate. And living our entire lives, private and public, individually and communally, as a people marked by love of the LORD God.

Listen & Love. That is how the LORD God asks us to respond. In everything we do. In everything we say. We are to listen and love the LORD God the way in which the LORD God has listened to and loved us. This is how we and our children and our children’s children will thrive.

Gary read for us Mark’s<sup>2</sup> version of this commandment, which is how this commandment is interpreted throughout the gospels. And I’m sure you noticed that the original here in Deuteronomy does not include the love your neighbor part. And that is not because Jesus or the gospel writers decided to add this. This understanding was already tied up in this great commandment. To love God with one’s heart, soul, and might, in other words, to love God with everything that you are and everything that you say or do, is to love everyone and everything that has breath. That is what it means.

And to so love the LORD God and only the LORD God means that we cannot worship or put idols or false gods before the LORD. We cannot put self before the other. We cannot put money or status or race or sexuality or gender or country of origin or immigration status or anything else before the love that the LORD God has for Creation and commands for us to have as well. For that and that alone will lead to our thriving in the land of milk and honey, which God has promised us.

A few weeks ago now, several of us from this church and the Presbytery traveled to Montreat, North Carolina for the CoInspire Conference. This conference was a place for people of faith to come together to learn, grow, and become equipped to do the work of eviscerating racism and liberating imagination in the church and the world.

On the last night of the conference, we gathered for worship and for communion. And the invitation to the Table was perhaps the most moving and beautiful part of the week. Because there was a huge table, set up on the stage, with many stools, and benches and chairs around it. The cloth was beautiful and bright. Multicolored and patterned. And the meal was set out in abundance.

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 12:28-34.

And one of the worship leaders began to explain that this Table had been set for all. And as she went through the list of folks who have in the past or are currently being excluded from full participation in the church and our society someone who fell into those groups got up from the gathered body and made their way onto the stage to take a seat at the Table.

It took some time to fill this Table, and it was so incredibly powerful because right before our eyes was the fully inclusive, fully reconciled, fully realized kingdom of God.

And it broke my heart, and it broke other folks' hearts because it really did reveal to us that we still have so much work to do to achieve that vision in our churches, in our country, and in our world.

My heart breaks when I read the news of protests around the world, desperate folks seeking better lives for them, their children, and their children's children. The news of corruption and suspicion and war and greed tearing apart communities across the globe. The news of rising sea levels, rising temperatures, rising desperation. My heart breaks.

*Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Ehad...*

The LORD God is our God, the LORD God alone. And God has shown us great grace and love. God has delivered us and given us a land, a community where we can thrive. We may not be able to fix the world or the country in our lifetime, and honestly, that's probably not our job anyway.

The LORD God has shown us that the way to respond to what God has done is by loving God, and God alone, with our whole heart, soul, and might.

I believe very strongly that this means that we build communities who love God and one another the way God has loved us.

So let us respond by being a community of people who seek to deliver the enslaved from the hand of their oppressors. Who provide water in parched places and food in deprived spaces. Who sets the Table and invite every last person to come and take a seat that has been prepared just for them.

So that all people can know a sense of belonging. So that all people have a place to call home. Food to eat and clean water to drink. So that all people may thrive in this glorious land flowing with milk and honey.

In the name of the Triune God, who Creates, Sustains, and Redeems us all. AMEN.