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The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost October 23, 2022

The Law Produces Total Dependence on God

It is natural for us to believe that our relationship with God revolves around our obedience to his commands. Too often we think that if we can apply the right spiritual advice and effort, we can gain God's approval. In today's Gospel, Jesus provides the divine teaching that expels this thought. He uses God's law to expose our sin and crush our pride. He seeks to lead us to turn away from self-efforts and look to God who alone is able and willing to save us.

Sermon Deuteronomy 10:12-22

And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the LORD's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?

To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it. Yet the LORD set his affection on your ancestors and loved them, and he chose you, their descendants, above all the nations—as it is today. Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer. For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt. Fear the LORD your God and serve him. Hold fast to him and take your oaths in his name. He is the one you praise; he is your God, who performed for you those great and awesome wonders you saw with your own eyes. Your ancestors who went down into Egypt were seventy in all, and now the LORD your God has made you as numerous as the stars in the sky.

Introduction: Do you have a favorite sermon? Maybe it's your wedding sermon, or maybe the sermon from a loved one's funeral. Or, maybe it's a sermon from some random Sunday years ago that struck you right where you needed to be struck.

If you were to ask an Israelite what his favorite sermon was, odds are he'd answer: "Deuteronomy." That's because almost the whole book of Deuteronomy is a sermon preached by Moses. And this wasn't just any sermon of Moses. It was his last. And Moses knew it was his last. After decades of leading his people through ups and downs, miracles and sins, triumphs and embarrassments, Moses has one last chance to speak to his people. What would he say?

What Moses said that day, inspired by the Holy Spirit, has been perfectly preserved for around 3500 years. Clearly, what he said was important. Perhaps it was many Israelites' favorite sermon, but I pray that soon, you will understand why it is your favorite sermon, too. As we go through the lesson for today, which is a summary of his sermon, we'll find out that the theme of Moses' sermon was: **Walk in God's Ways: in his commandments and in his love.**

The scene of Deuteronomy is like the dramatic climax of some epic movie. Moses stands on the mountain just outside of the Promised Land, addressing for one last time the millions of Israelites. What would he say? He started by pointing them back to Egypt to the beginning of their journey forty years before.

I. In His Commandments

It all began in slavery in Egypt. The Israelites had been enslaved there for centuries. But God sent an outcast, a lowly shepherd, named Moses to break his people free. To do so, God sent ten plagues to leave no doubt that he was the one true God with power over all creation—and the one true God was on Israel's side. He led them through the Red Sea to a new life, a journey to the land he promised them. They praised him as their majestic, awesome, wonderful God. He promised to care for them along the way, and he did. He promised to love them, and he did: he even gave them a physical covenant—an agreement that said, if you keep these commandments, if you walk in my ways, I will bless you beyond what you can imagine. He did everything and more for Israel.

But Israel did not do everything they could to honor their God. Over and over again on their journey through the wilderness, they met God's faithfulness with unfaithfulness. They showed their lack of trust in God by complaining about the water, the food. They preferred to bow down to a golden calf instead of God. They rebelled multiple times against God's chosen leader, Moses, and asked him to lead them back into slavery instead of to the promised land.

In his sermon, Moses pointed them back to their sins against God's commandments. Moses, preaching his sermon while standing on the threshold to the promised land, proved to them that they had no reason, no right, to expect God to let them cross over into the land. They had witnessed God's faithfulness and still fumbled his commandments in response.

Of course, Moses could just as well be pointing back at the sins of our past. Moses might say to us, "You think you deserve to enter eternal life? Impossible. Think of your life: have you kept God's commandments?" Just like Israel repeatedly strayed from the ten commandments, we've strayed from the two that Jesus gave to summarize Moses's: love God with all your heart, soul, and strength, and love your neighbor. Interestingly, our readings from today mirror those commands from Jesus: Moses says, **circumcise your hearts** (in other words, cut away anything in your life that doesn't help you give glory to God) **and you are to love those who are foreigners** (in other words, love your neighbor, even if they haven't done anything to deserve it). Have we loved God with all our heart and soul? No, we prioritize our wants over God's wants. Have we at least loved our neighbor? No, we make excuses to avoid helping the foreigner and the needy. While we wander through life this side of heaven, instead of walking in God's ways to promised eternal life, we stray off onto other paths that all eventually lead back to slavery to sin.

But Jesus chases us down. He leads us back to the right path. How does he do that? First, he perfectly loved God the Father, always keeping his commands. And he perfectly loved his neighbors—all humans, friends, enemies, and strangers. Then, his love for God and his love for his neighbor culminated on Good Friday, when he both satisfied God's command of sinlessness while giving his life up for all human neighbors. Finally, he rose again to prove that his life would count for our lives. Because Jesus walked in God's commands perfectly, by faith it is as if we have never strayed from God's ways all our life. Only because of Jesus, we can be certain that we will someday enter the promised land of eternal life.

Transition: Of course, we aren't there yet. Moses's sermon gives us instructions for our journey through the wilderness of this life; and more importantly, he gives the motivation for following those instructions.

II. In His Love

For all the unfaithfulness Moses had seen over the journey from Egypt, he saw that much more faithfulness from God to his people. Every time the Israelites rebelled, God had the right to send them back to slavery—or worse, wipe them off the face of the earth altogether. But, because of his unlimited love, God forgave them over and over and continued to lead them towards the promised land.

Moses had seen 40 years of Israel's persistent rejection, and he knew they had no chance of walking in God's commands after he was gone. And he let them know. He called them a stiff-necked people; they were like a donkey that refuses to walk the way its owner leads it, even though the owner knows the way that is best for it.

Moses had seen a lot of rebellion from the Israelites; imagine all the rebellion that God has seen from us. God, the God of the universe, who owes us nothing but punishment for our disobedience, sent his Son to us to carry our punishment

on his shoulders. We know this, we cherish this, and yet our sinful nature is so stiff-necked that we still manage to forget God's love and love our own ways. It can seem impossible to mimic God's love.

And yet God piles love upon love. Just as he chose to forgive Israel when they rebelled, God chooses to forgive our stubbornness. Not because of anything we've done to deserve it, but solely because he loves us and has loved us before we were born and will love us for eternity. The God who was powerful enough to destroy Egypt with just his words has chosen to love you. Miracle of miracles, he has decided to save your eternal destination. And, wonder of wonders, he has promised to bring you into your inheritance of eternal life. Just as he led Israel to their promised land despite their failings, we can be certain that he will keep his promise to us as well.

God loves us so much. Knowing our story has been guided by God's love, Moses's sermon makes so much sense: **And now...what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the Lord's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?** I ask myself: Can I do all this? No way—Moses, you're asking too much! Fear the Lord, walk in his ways, love him, serve him with all my heart and all my soul, and observe his commands? I can't do this; I still have that sinful nature.

But Moses answers me: **To the Lord your God belong the heavens, the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it. Yet the Lord set his affection on your ancestors and loved them, and he chose you, their descendants, above all the nations, as it is today.** Just like God chose the Israelites, God chose me to walk in his ways on my journey through life. God chose you. He loves you and chooses to send you his Holy Spirit so that you can fear the Lord, you will walk in his ways, and even serve him completely with all your heart and soul. Moses continues, **Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer.** By the Spirit we can we get rid of anything and everything that distracts us from glorifying God. We can walk in God's ways instead of stubbornly veering off onto our own path.

Next, Moses tells us what, exactly, God's ways are: **He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt.** As we walk in God's ways, we copy his loving actions. If the God of heaven and earth is not too important to love orphans, widows, and outcasts, then we are certainly not too busy to care for them too. Ask yourself: what's the best opportunity you have to serve others? Are you well-off? There are millions of people living in poverty, even in our own country. You'll find a way to help. Do you have lots of free time? Think of all the lonely people who want nothing more than a conversation. Do you care about others? Millions of people need to know they're loved. Do you want others to be saved? Love them! So many are foreigners to the faith. Remember that you were once a foreigner to the faith in slavery to sin, before God led through the waters of baptism, redirecting your journey into his glorious ways. Share the hope and love you have now with someone who needs to hear it.

Conclusion: The Israelites needed to hear these words in Moses's final sermon. 3500 years later, his words are just as important for our lives. Make Moses's sermon your favorite: his sermon that says all these amazing things: that the God of the universe decides to love you. That he saved you, and that he is leading you to your eternal home. While you are on this earth, walk in his ways by reflecting his love to as many people as you can, as deeply as you can. When you do that, you'll find yourself preaching a sermon of your own: a sermon of love. A sermon of walking in his ways. Amen.

The sermon was preached by Jacob Borgwardt, a second-year seminarian at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.