

Courage to Teach our Children

WNMC, Matins

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Lectionary Readings: Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25; Ps. 78:1-7; I Thess. 4:13-18; Matt. 25:1-13.

Verse for Reflection: “We will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord.” (Ps. 78:4)

Hymn of Response: Hymnal #487 “Teach me, O Lord”

Introduction:

Stanley Hauerwas, an eminent theologian of our time, has this to say in a chapter of theological reflections on the family: “Morally our children are suffering because we do not have the courage of our convictions” (*Community of Character*, ch.9). Hauerwas is dealing with the problem of teaching our children within the context of pluralism. He applies this to the specific problem of teaching his son an ethic of non-resistance. “What is missing,” Hauerwas argues, “is the necessary community support that makes it clear to me that not to initiate my son into such an ethic is an act of cowardice.” Our readings today pose this important question: Do we have the courage to teach our children and grandchildren what we have come to believe to be the truth?

Psalm 78:

The verse for reflection in our order of worship is taken from Psalm 78: “We will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord” (vs. 4). This Psalm is an exploration of the importance of teaching our children and grandchildren.

There are a variety of things that we are encouraged to pass on to our children: (a) First, “dark sayings from of old” – we are not exactly sure what these dark sayings are, but the one thing we do know about them is that they are old. There is nothing here about being relevant and preoccupied with the new and the novel. (b) Secondly, we are encouraged in verse 4 to tell the next generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done.” Indeed, the Psalm goes on to review 5 centuries of God’s dealings with Israel.

Are we doing this in our churches today? Are we as parents and grandparents still telling our children the stories of the history of God’s people, Israel, and the history of the church, including our Mennonite history? Richard Weaver reminds us that “the chief trouble with the contemporary generation is that it has not read the minutes of the last meeting” (*Ideas Have Consequences*).

(c) Thirdly, Psalm 78 urges us to tell the next generation that God has “established a decree in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel,” in verse 5. Ah yes, don’t forget Mount Sinai when God gave to Israel the 10 commandments. And these commandments are not only relevant to Israel, but to all God’s people. Jesus and the apostles clearly show that these commandments also apply to the church. So, like Asaph in Psalm 78, we are to teach our children and grandchildren God’s moral laws, which are eternal laws that are relevant for the next generation, and the next, and the next.

Here I would like to remind us that this responsibility to teach future generations God's moral laws is picked up in the New Testament, by Jesus, and Paul, and Peter. It is not just an Old Testament emphasis.

There is shift of focus in Psalm 78, starting in verse 7. Do not forget the works of God, and keep his commandments, the Psalmist urges at the end of our reading (vs. 7). There seems to be some urgency here, and we soon discover the reason for this urgency. There is a danger of forgetting. There is a danger of not keeping God's commandments. Verse 8 goes on to say that there is also a danger that the next generation will be "like their ancestors, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God."

That is why we need to have the courage to teach the next generation – because God's people are always in danger of drifting, of becoming disobedient, of not being faithful to an ever faithful God.

Joshua 24:

All of this is reinforced in our reading from Joshua, chapter 24. Joshua, the successor to Moses, has led the Israelites into the promised land, and in the concluding chapters of the book of Joshua, we find that he is "old and well advanced in years" (23:1). In fact, Joshua is over 100 years old, and like Moses, he gives the people of Israel one final sermon before he dies.

He convenes a grand assembly of all the tribes of Israel, and all the elders, judges, and officers of Israel, and the language used to describe this assembly is interesting. We are told that "they presented themselves before God" (24:1). This is not just Joshua giving a farewell address. The entire assembly, old and young, ordinary Israelites and leaders and lawyers, realize that they are standing on holy ground, and they had better listen as Joshua boldly declares, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel" (24:2).

What does Joshua do, once he has their attention? He reviews the history of Israel, just as the Psalmist did. He tells all the generations assembled before him, about the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done. He reminds them of God's goodness and God's grace.

Our reading didn't include these intervening verses, but instead picked up the story again at verse 14, which is worth reading again. "Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord."

Interesting! After a history lesson, comes a direct admonition ' "Put away the gods that your ancestors served." An admonition in the present tense, but with a reminder of the past. And then a dose of realism – "Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve" (vs. 15). Joshua is quite aware of the fact that his generation might be like their ancestors, and not be willing to serve the Lord. And therefore he challenges them to make a choice.

The people's response to this challenge is interesting. They confidently answer: "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods" (vs. 16). Joshua responds

in a rather hard-hitting fashion (vss. 19-20). And the people once again protest, “No, we will serve the Lord.” (vs. 21) The cycle of admonitions and responses is repeated over and over again, and we find ourselves getting tired as we read, even exasperated. Why is Joshua repeating his admonitions over and over again?

The text suggests two reasons for this repeating cycle of admonitions and responses: First, Joshua realizes that the people aren’t being entirely honest. He is aware of the fact that they are presently worshipping other gods, and so their words ring rather hollow (vss. 14, 23). So, Joshua bluntly confronts them about their hypocrisy again and again.

What about us? Are we sometimes being hypocrites, boldly mouthing words that declare our allegiance to the Lord, when in fact we are worshipping other idols?

There is a second reason why Joshua keeps repeating his admonitions, despite the positive responses of the people. Joshua, like the Psalmist, is very much aware of the tendency of God’s people to become unfaithful. And so, he uses every tool in his arsenal to reinforce faithfulness.

His approach seemed to work. In the verses that follow our reading, we read that “Israel served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua and had known all the work that the Lord did for Israel.” (vs. 31) Sadly, the introduction to Judges, the next book of the bible, starts by reviewing Joshua’s farewell address, and its immediate results, using the very same words we have read and reviewed.

But then follow some words about the next generation: “And another generation grew up after them, who did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and . . . and they abandoned the LORD, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt” (Judges 2:10-11). Just two generations later the people were following other gods.

I wonder, are we sufficiently aware of the fact that we have a tendency to forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods? Do we think we are somehow superior to our ancestors, whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God? Are we perhaps overconfident about our own spirituality and faithfulness? Remember Paul’s words: “So if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall! (1 Cor. 10:12)

May God help us to be faithful in teaching our children and grandchildren. May the Holy Spirit convict us when we don’t practice what we preach, or when we are drifting away from being faithful to our Lord. And may the words of Jesus remind us to be alert, to keep awake, because we know neither the day nor the hour when the bridegroom comes (Matt. 25:13). Amen