

Will Our Children Have Faith?

The Reverend Peter Cook

Sunday, September 2, 2012

The First Congregational Church of Burlington, United Church of Christ
Burlington, Vermont

Deuteronomy 4:1-9

4 So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. *2* You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the LORD your God with which I am charging you. *3* You have seen for yourselves what the LORD did with regard to the Baal of Peor—how the LORD your God destroyed from among you everyone who followed the Baal of Peor, *4* while those of you who held fast to the LORD your God are all alive today.

5 See, just as the LORD my God has charged me, I now teach you statutes and ordinances for you to observe in the land that you are about to enter and occupy. *6* You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!’ *7* For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is whenever we call to him? *8* And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?

9 But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children’s children.

As a father, I have sought to expose my children to a variety of experiences which have helped to cultivate their conscience and a passion for justice and service. One such experience was taking my children to the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. Have you been there? The tour in the Museum begins at the top floor where you are exposed to the earliest roots of anti-Semitism. As you descend down through the building going from floor to floor you witness the ghastly consequences of anti-Semitic thinking all of which led to the Holocaust. Millions of Jews died in the Holocaust but other groups of people were killed as well. For instance, of the 11 million people killed during the Holocaust, six million were Polish citizens. Three million were Polish Jews and another three million were Polish Catholics. Other groups of people were gypsies, Jehovah’s witnesses, the disabled and people who were gay. Those who sought to resist the Nazis’ also ended up in the death camps. As I walked with my children through this museum I was overwhelmed with emotion as this tragic tale was told.

Making my way through the museum, I thought about other instances of massive loss of innocent life in this century. Consider the genocide in Cambodia. Or what happened in Rwanda in 1994 where, on the basis of ethnic identification, a million innocent people lost their lives. Or consider what is currently taking place in the South Sudan, Sudan or the Congo. Indeed Emmanuel who works at our church and started the Association of Africans Living in Vermont, reminded me the other day that over 3 million people have lost their lives in the Congo. Many of the people, who were fortunate enough to have escaped these tragedies, live in our community. They have found asylum here. We go to school together. We eat together. We shop in the same places. Some of their relatives were not so fortunate. They were exterminated and never made it here. The Holocaust Museum helps us as a nation to think critically about the many forms of discrimination that inflict so much damage.

And yet the museum also offers a word of hope. With these terrible images of discrimination swirling in my head, I arrived at the end of the tour and entered an immense marble encased room bathed in light with a beautiful flowing fountain. As I sat in silence, looking at that fountain, trying to make sense of what I had seen, I looked up and there inscribed in the marble above the fountain I took note of these words from Deuteronomy 4:9 which we heard this morning in a slightly different translation.

Only guard yourself and guard your soul carefully, lest you forget the things your eyes saw, and lest these things depart your heart all the days of your life, and you shall make them known to your children, and to your children's children.

The Deuteronomist remind us of the necessity to help our children remember what has come before and develop a keen sense of right and wrong. The Deuteronomist ask us to see more clearly all forms of discrimination that go against the timeless ordinances and statutes of our God. These ordinances give life and defy death.

When the people of Israel found themselves in the wilderness, it was the Ten Commandments (remember those ordinances?) that helped Israel keep their focus on that which was life giving. The commandments built up the strength of their community while steering them away from other temptations that might break down community. God's law became a lens through which Israel could evaluate right from wrong. As we consider the wilderness of violence and discrimination we still live in sometimes, two commandments "Thou shall not kill and thou shalt not worship false God's" come to mind.

When we worship a false God we end up defending this God with a violence towards others which we think will take a way our fear and make us safe. For instance, when we worship a false God of race, it may not be long before we end up rationalizing the destruction of those who do not fit our narrow picture of what is divine. It was Martin Luther King, Jr. who in his famous sermon, "The Drum Major Instinct," once mocked white supremacists when he challenged a claim made by a man he knew who said, "that God was a

charter member of the White Citizens Council.” And so King retorted in his sermon, “God being the charter member means that everybody who's in that [White Citizens Council] has a kind of divinity, a kind of superiority. And think of what has happened in history as a result of this perverted use of the drum major instinct. It has led to the most tragic prejudice, the most tragic expressions of man's inhumanity to man.”¹

But God, of course, transcends all barriers and judges all efforts to accord divinity to anything in place of God. God is not confined to one race. God should help us to see that all life is sacred. Truly attending to the commandments gives us all a way to critique our current situation and make some judgments which should lead us to embrace life instead of death.

For the Deuteronomist, having a highly developed sense of history about what has taken place before is also essential. Remembering the stories of struggle and freedom from oppression are central to the Jewish narrative. During the time I spent in South Africa I encountered many people who worried the next generation would forget the atrocities of Apartheid. Throughout the country were murals which invited all to look back and look forward at the same time. This was a way for South Africans to say to all of us, move forward but do not forget history lest the injustices of the past be repeated. Remember says the Deuteronomist don't ever forget what you have seen.

I think practicing the commandments and applying them to our current situation, while stepping ourselves in history, becomes a central task for a healthy community of faith.

But how does this happen really? On my kitchen wall, hangs a large print entitled “Church Picnic Story Quilt” by Faith Ringgold. It is the picture of people of many generations gathered in one place to eat and enjoy fellowship together. It is a picture which some might see as old fashioned. But I love this picture because it is a living symbol of what a church community can be all about. It's not a picture where the adults are all in one place and the kids are shoved off to the side. It is a place where there seems to be an ease of relationship across the generations where people fellowship and learn together. A church community becomes a place where the wisdom of one generation is passed on to the next.

Next Sunday is Homecoming Sunday. Everyone will be coming home to worship. We will begin our Sunday school program. And, of course, we will have a picnic. We will invite our friends from New Alpha Missionary Baptist Church to join us for worship and the picnic and we in turn are invited to go worship with New Alpha in the afternoon. We will get a lot of church that day, a full immersion sort of experience. When we gather we will pray to one God who is above all other Gods.

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr. , “The Drum Major Instinct”, A Knock at Midnight, New York: Warner Books, 1998.

Our worship and fellowship will allow us to practice and model what it means to be together as a community of faith. We will tell the stories of our faith and remember what came before while actively seeking to live out the principles of those stories in everything we say and do. As we invest deeply in our communal life, it will have an impact on our children. So often in churches, we put all the weight on the Sunday school hour to do everything for our kids. All the pressure gets put on a few teachers. But, in fact, all of us are teachers of the faith. Not just parents. Not just Sunday school teachers but all of us. From the moment our children come through these doors to the time they leave, every interaction becomes an opportunity to learn and grow. Together we have histories to share, perspective to offer, and guidance to render with God's commandments as our guide.

When we have kids who are trying to sort through all the confusing messages thrown at them, sometimes what we need is not another instructional aid but a grandfatherly or grandmotherly figure willing to sit down and share a story of their life. What riches and wisdom born of struggle could you share to offer a little perspective and point us towards a way being that is life giving rather than death dealing? Or in the words of the Deuteronomist, "don't forget the things your eyes saw lest these things depart from your heart all the days of your life." Instead "make them known to your children, and to your children's children" that they may find faith.