

“Divided Loyalties”

February 12, 2023

Scripture: Deuteronomy 30:11-20; I Corinthians 3:1-9

The final speech Moses delivers to the Israelites is a warning to them of the consequences that come when loyalties are divided. If we accept that the first five books of the Bible, the Torah, were compiled while Israel was in exile in Babylon, then we can imagine how close to home this warning must have felt. Essentially the people languishing in captivity would identify their condition with their failure to follow Moses’s advice. And as the prospect of returning to Israel emerged, these words would echo across the millennia to shape the future of their society.

In Moses’s understanding entrance to the Promised Land meant leaving behind all the gods of Egypt. These are people whose parents and grandparents, the ones who started this journey, were enslaved. You can’t shake off centuries of conditioning overnight. It takes time to move from enslavement to freedom, to adopt a new culture and worldview. That’s why a journey that should have been a matter of weeks or maybe months took forty years. Forty years is biblical shorthand for “a really long time.” It also represents a generation. All the adults who had left in a hurry had to die out before the Israelites were ready to enter the Promised Land. Even their leader, Moses himself, would not be the one to lead them in.

Moses understood that the people had no future if they kept one foot in the past. That’s an insight our society often forgets. There are so many voices today calling on us to restore our society, to take something back that’s been lost. That’s the message of Christian nationalism that’s been gaining popularity among white evangelicals. They want to recapture a former condition when white Christianity dominated the culture and we didn’t have to contend with our history of racism. We didn’t have to question whether access to society’s goods like education, wealth and healthcare is fair for people of color. We didn’t have to apologize for federal and parochial Native American schools and the removal of children from their homes and communities. We didn’t have to recognize the rights of gay and lesbian and transgender people because they were kept in the dark and could be entirely ignored. Christian nationalism wants to serve the gods of the past, the gods from whom we’ve been liberated.

Moses tells his people, if they want to prosper in the Promised Land, they must commit themselves to follow the statutes, ordinances and commandments they’ve been given in Torah. And as Jesus will later clarify, along with many other Jewish teachers, Torah is rooted in love of God and love of neighbor. So, the way to measure the priority of those statutes, ordinances and commandments is through how they express love of God and love of neighbor. That’s how society is meant to be structured in the Promised Land, or what Jesus called the Kingdom of God.

But to get there we have to overcome our attraction to enticing speeches and charismatic leaders. Paul is concerned, for instance, with the divided loyalties among the members of the church in Corinth. We don’t know why some of them are impressed with this person Apollos. His name doesn’t come up a lot anywhere else in Paul’s letters, but they’re apparently working together. In Acts, Apollos is described as an exquisite orator from Alexandria, which was a hub

of philosophy and learning. That may be accurate, but Acts isn't the best resource for that kind of information. Apparently, though, Apollos had a reputation for eloquence. But I don't think he's preaching anything different from Paul; Paul doesn't criticize Apollos's message. His complaint is with those in the community who seem to think they need to identify with Apollos, or with Paul or with some other individual. So long as they do that they undermine the heart of the gospel. They're attributing the prosperity and well-being of the community to some person and not to God where it belongs. Paul and Apollos are only instruments in service to God for the life of the church. Others can plant seeds, others can water, but only God can give the growth.

Like the Israelites leaving Egypt, the Corinthians must make a choice. They have to leave something behind if they want to move forward. Paul says he fed them on milk, something easy to digest, because they weren't ready for the real meat of the gospel. But they can't stay that way forever. They need to go deeper into their journey if they want to become the "beloved community," or as Paul says, "God's field." Letting go of their attachments and divisions is a hard step to take. When you've learned something life-changing from someone you trust it's hard not to frame your new understanding in reference to that person. Paul seems to understand that whatever he and Apollos have helped the people discover it's not about the two of them. And he needs the people of Corinth to get that, too, or they'll always be stuck in the past, always pining for what's lost.

That happens to churches all the time. We still tend to think about the past with a romantic fondness that can keep us stuck. The lessons we learned as children were taught in a different context, a different world, than the one we live in now. We're seeing the effect of that in our society where some states want to control how students learn about our history or want to prohibit certain ideas from being read because they go against the grain of what was taught in the past. Of course the best way to ensure the popularity of a book is to ban it, so something good may come of all that clamor. But that takes a lot more time and shouldn't be necessary. Our kids shouldn't have to sneak around if they want to read Richard Wright's *Native Son* or Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. The point is, if we continue to look back and long for the gods of the past, we'll never enter the Promised Land, we'll never even see it.

Our scripture doesn't provide a blueprint for society; it's not an instruction manual. Scripture gives us a framework, parameters. It challenges us to build the community our world needs if we want to experience the blessings of peace and justice. Every generation is called on to take a hard look at itself and determine what needs to be done to love God and neighbor with integrity. We're at a moment in our history when we're being asked to look closely at the practices and policies of the past and see what needs to be repaired. Where have we fallen short in the pursuit of justice and compassion? How can we make amends and provide compensation? There are a lot of folks who find that process uncomfortable, who don't like the idea that our ancestors may have been wrong, even sinful. I'm sure among those who first heard these words of Moses as they languished in exile in Babylon were some who refused to admit their society had failed. But as Moses teaches, until they can let go of those attachments, those divided loyalties, until we can take an honest look at our failures, we'll never discover the blessings of the Promised Land.

Life and death, blessings and curses, future and past: we're called to make a choice. And as Moses says, this is not beyond our capacity to do. We can build the society God longs for us to have. We can choose the way of justice and compassion and generosity. "The word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe." But our loyalty must be certain and undivided. As our affirmation, taken from the Belhar Confession, states, "we confess one name, one Lord, for one cause, with one hope, which is the height and the breadth and the depth and the love of Christ." That commitment is how we enter the Promised Land, and by living up to it, no matter how uncomfortable or awkward it might become, we can create the society God calls us to be. No longer enslaved to the past, serving other gods, we can be free to love and to grow and become God's beloved community.

Amen