

“Why We Give”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
October 26, 2014

Deuteronomy 34: 1-8
Matthew 22: 34-40

I have served the last four years on the Advisory Council for Pyoca Camp, Conference, and Retreat Center. This is the camp our presbytery uses, and our church was there the first two weekends of this month, for our all-church retreat and for a workday helping with maintenance projects. Pyoca is a gem within our larger church, and it's been a true joy to serve with a variety of people from two presbyteries on this Advisory Council.

I have been the chair of that council since the start of this year, and at our first meeting of the year, the executive director announced he was leaving. Not the greatest way to start my tenure, huh? In all honesty, it was something I knew about and was prepared for. Rich Swartwood had been the executive director at Pyoca for twenty years and had done an incredible job of leaving the camp in a place ten-times better than when he began. He also felt it was time for a new challenge for him, and that it was time for Pyoca to have a new voice in leadership. That's why he accepted the position of executive director at Clearwater Forest Camp in Minnesota in February.

Of course, that left us to search for a new leader, and I was tasked with being the chair of that search team. Along with four other members of the council, we have been working on this search since April. We received applications from at least thirty individuals, from as faraway places as California, Florida, Wisconsin, and even the United Kingdom. In August, we narrowed our search to five individuals, who we spoke with through video conference calls. And then we narrowed that search down to two individuals, who we met with face-to-face at Pyoca earlier this month.

I am happy to report we have a candidate who has accepted our offer to be the next executive director. It's not official yet, because the entire Advisory Council has to act on our recommendation. But after November 8, I will be happy to share more with you about him and how we are excited about the gifts and talents he brings to this vital ministry in our larger church.

This whole search process has made me think once again about leadership, and how organizations respond to change. It has been a challenge, at times, to walk through this process when so much of Pyoca's identity had been tied to one individual. There have been questions like, “Who is going to do this?” or “How will we make sure this

important task gets taken care of?” Many times, an organization can become so wedded to its leaders that when that leadership changes, it can feel like a ship without a rudder on the open seas.

While there has been some anxiety surrounding Rich’s departure, I have to admit there has actually been more positive energy and hope for the future. In his absence, new people on the Advisory Council have stepped into important leadership roles, changes that will benefit the camp as a whole. The summer camp program went very well, with well-trained staff and volunteers providing another meaningful experience for all who attended. And we have been able to say, without fear or worry, that our next executive director will be different than our previous one – and that is a good thing! I believe healthy leadership and healthy organizations reflect this attitude, and I am excited about what God has in store for Pyoca in its next chapter of ministry.

As Moses stood on top of Mount Nebo, I wonder what was going through his mind. His eyes were looking out over a land that had been promised to him and his people by Yahweh, their God. That land had names associated with it: Gilead, Naphtali, Ephraim, Manasseh, Judah, Jericho. It stretched as far as his eyes could see – it was the “promised land.” The Lord called this the land of Moses’ ancestors: “This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, ‘I will give it to your descendants’” (Deuteronomy 34:4). That’s Moses and his people! But then, before Moses can consider the fullness of that statement, the Lord says, “I have let you see it with your own eyes, but you shall not cross over there” (34:4).

And with very little fanfare or further warning, Moses dies. He is not granted the pleasure of setting foot in the land of promise after forty years of living in exile in the wilderness. He is not granted the satisfaction of witnessing the completion of this journey, after withstanding the barrage of complaints over so many years from the Israelites. Moses dies, is buried “in the valley of the land of Moab,” in a burial place which is unknown and lost. How is this a healthy transition of leadership for an organization? Surely God could have done something a little more worthy of this great leader’s place and stature? At least name him “pastor emeritus” and let him enjoy the title for a year or two before his life on this earth is finished.

John Holbert writes about Moses: *The old boy remained in tip-top shape right to the end, needing neither corrective lenses nor regular workouts to remain fit. Yet, after all the grumbling of his Israelite travelers, after all the miraculous events of the Sea of Reeds and the wilderness of the Sinai, after he had taken a hurricane of abuse from those ingrates for forty years and more, still, God says, “You shall not cross over there” (34:4). This still potent and virile and 20-20 Moses dies on the wrong side of the Jordan River “and no one knows his burial place to this day” (34:6).*

The author of Deuteronomy inscribes a magnificent (eulogy) to the mighty Moses at the very end of his book: "Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom God knew face to face. He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that God sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel" (34:10-12). Yet, he dies too soon and is buried in an unmarked grave. All we can do is remember him and his deeds and attempt to do likewise, however little we are finally able to do to emulate him.

But, of course, the story offers hope; the Bible majors in hope. Moses was unique, but before his mysterious death and burial on the mountains of Moab, he chose Joshua to carry on the work of the Lord. He did that, in spite of so many of his own people who just would not listen to God's voice. Leaders come and leaders go, but God sends them again and again and again to remind us that God remains committed to us, no matter what ("When One Leader Dies: Reflections on Deuteronomy 34:1-12," John C. Holbert, <http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/When-One-Leader-Dies-John-C-Holbert-10-17-2014.html>).

Moses died not looking backwards, but instead looking forward. In our eyes, it might have seemed just to allow Moses to step foot into the "promised land." But that was not how God viewed what needed to happen. God viewed Moses as the leader the Israelites needed to get them to that particular point. Now, it was time for Joshua and others to be the leaders the Israelites needed in their new home. And as they looked forward in their new life of hope, they are reminded of the lessons they learned from the one "unequaled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform."

You might wonder why I chose this story for Stewardship Sunday. Two things stand out for me when we consider the end of Moses' life and how we give of our time, talent, and treasure. First, our motivation for giving to the church should not be based on who is in a leadership role. It should be based on how we sense God's presence in all aspects of the church's life, and how we seek to continue to change people's lives through these ministries of God in the church.

The Israelites spent their prerequisite amount of time mourning Moses' death, but that didn't stop them from stepping forward and following Joshua into what God had led them to. At Pyoca, many of our supporters have continued to give of their time, talent and treasure throughout this year of transition, despite not having a permanent executive director in place. Our giving should not be based on individual personalities or loyalties or preferences within the church. It should be based on our faith in Yahweh our God, who has led us in the past, and will continue to lead us into a bright, hopeful future, if only we will trust in him.

Second, I was struck by the phrase: “I will give it to your descendants.” God had made a promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, a promise of a land where their families and their descendants could live – a promised land. Now, after decades of being enslaved, of being persecuted, of wandering in a wilderness, God has fulfilled his promise. The land they will inhabit has been entrusted to them, and it will be up to the Israelites to teach their descendants the importance of this place and the faith they have in their benevolent God.

Every time we make a choice about what we will do with our time, or how we will spend our money, we are influencing the faith of our descendants. If we make a conscious decision to take time to hang out at home instead of assisting with a ministry or serving in leadership in the church, our children and grandchildren are learning from our behavior. If we make a conscious decision to spend our money on other things first, and leave God what is left over, our children and our grandchildren are learning from our behavior. Our faith is not a faith just for us, just for our generation. It is a faith that must encompass the generations to follow, the generations that have not yet been born. If we are not willing to make our faith our priority in our life – in how we choose to spend our money and our time – then how can we expect our children or grandchildren or great-grandchildren to do any differently? Our stewardship must teach our descendants what God has meant to us in the past, and what hope we have in God for the future.

As many of you know, I’m not afraid to talk about money in the church. I believe it is the crux of who we are as disciples, and through our generosity God strengthens our faithfulness. When I receive my paycheck, the first checks I write are my family’s pledge to John Knox Presbyterian Church. We have not raised our pledge the last few years, because our family income has not increased. It’s unlikely to increase in 2015, either.

(Pull out pledge card and cross out amount.) But, that is not stopping us from increasing our pledge by \$10 per week to support this church and its mission next year. Why? Because God deserves the first slice of the pie, not what is leftover.

What are you willing to do to show the next generation how our faith demands our highest priority? May we have the faith to look forward with hope, and the courage to act with generosity to our God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.