

Nov 7, 2021. Holy Communion. 3rd Week of Stewardship
"Continuity at Our Center"
Deuteronomy 6:1-9 Mark 12:28-34
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"Shema, Israel. Adonai, Eloheinu, Adonai, Echad." "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one God." The passage continues, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." In seminary, as part of our training, we students had to struggle to read passages of scripture in their original language--ancient Hebrew for the Old Testament, and ancient Greek for the New Testament. This passage from Deuteronomy called "The Shema" or the "Great Commandment" was the first passage we learned. I remember, we spoke it together as a class. The Shema is held in high regard and is recited, even today, in Jewish worship. It is the repetition and the formalization in liturgy that keeps this commandment alive and familiar— as verse six says, "in your heart." The passage goes on to give descriptions of how to pass this central message down. Recite it to your children—bind, fix, and post it on your hand and forehead and on your doors and gates. Embody these words to remember who and whose you are.

We spend a great deal of time and energy planning for the future, and this is good, whether it is in our personal life or here in our church. We need to have vision to lead us forward. It is also important to remember, to stand on our foundation and our history and to learn important lessons from them. But this morning, I want to talk not about "beginnings" - about the "future" --not about the past and its value to us, but instead, about finding inspiration and guidance smack in the middle of things which, in reality, is where we always are. I want to talk about the value of "continuity" in a life of faith, and in the life of the church. What are we doing now that reflects our past and respects our future? The word, "continuity", is formed of two roots, "con" meaning "together" or "with" (as in the words; con-tact or con-ference or con-tent) and "tenir" which means, "to hold" or "to touch". So, con-tinuity means to hold together or even "to stay in touch." The dictionary definition of continuity, "an uninterrupted connection or union," describes its outward manifestation in the world, but what makes this uninterrupted connection possible internally? Here, the roots of the word are helpful. What makes continuity possible is the capacity of people, ideas, cultures, families, or traditions "to hold together" and to stay in touch with each other as well as with their dreams and their traditions. As we look ahead into the next years what will give this church and its congregation continuity, what will ensure its capacity to "stay in touch" and "to hold together?" Beginnings, however exciting, are empty gestures and mean little and memories are simply sentimental and sappy, without the lasting power of continuity to connect them.

In the passage from Mark, the Sadducees have been testing Jesus with questions about scripture. They intend to trip him up and to expose him as a fraud or a false prophet. But then, a question is asked by another in the crowd, a scribe. It becomes apparent that his inquiry is genuine, not generated by hostility, but by a sincere desire to know. He interrupts the disputing with the simple question, "Which commandment is the first of all? Jesus replies to this question by reciting the first lines of "the Shema" and then he adds the second part, and "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." This second commandment is also in line with Jewish thought, but here it is expressed to make a deliberate point. Having correctly interpreted what he has just heard Jesus say, the scribe, then, adds his own conclusion. "This is much more important than burnt offerings and sacrifices."

What is the essence of continuity? Continuity in the Judeo-Christian faith includes its traditions and customs, laws, rituals, and stories passed down through the generations. But, as the second command reminds us, the motivation, and the guiding force behind all these components of lasting continuity is love. Memory uses the containers provided by images, rituals, parables, and symbols but without love at its core, none of these will last, and memory, itself, will not survive. Love is the blood that keeps the tissues, muscles, and organs of our faith alive.

Continuity must be embodied. Our agreement on creed and organizational structure will not keep the church alive. These are only dry bones, no closer to the vitality of life than a skeleton bolted together and hung in a museum is to the human being surveying it. Needless to say, even our best goals for church growth, our detailed building plans, and our creative worship themes or program ideas will blow away in the winds of time like so much dust. We are the living players of the faith. It either comes alive or perishes with us.

Continuity demands intimacy. The rituals we perform in worship will be reduced to only pretty words and basic elements if we are not guided and inspired by love. Candles are just fire, baptism just water, communion only bread and grape juice, and this sanctuary, only a room. Our reverent attention makes them holy.

Continuity requires the acceptance of change. The presence of visitors in our worship and the addition of new members to our church, change the dynamics of our relationships and the focus of our programs and if we openly and warmly welcome this change, we can forge what we have been into what we can be, a new and vital community. The loss of people who have walked among us, sharing our work and play, may also change the direction and dynamics of our church community but

if we stand on the foundations they have built and keep their stories alive among us, their spirits become a part of the collective spirit of this church. Bill Johnson, Grace and Bob Jones, Don Dayhuff, Dick Knutson, Earl and Virginia Rau, Mike Maus, Bill Martin, are among the most recent cherished souls that have passed on here at First United Church of Arvada. I think about them. Their jokes and their personalities, their talents, kindnesses, values and philosophies, are here in this room with me and with many of you. All life ends, but memory empowered by love resurrects. Our family and friends are forever inscribed not only in the membership book of this church, but on all of our hearts. Embodied memory touches us and holds us together.

Before I close, I want to return to an earlier thought, about finding inspiration and guidance smack in the middle of things. All life is wondrous. Existence is an astounding gift. But like a vase of brilliantly beautiful cut flowers in the middle of a table, life is short. Like a sandcastle on the beach, like a flaming Maple in the fall, or its new green delicate sprouts in the spring, it passes far too quickly. Yet knowing that the flowers in the vase are beautiful only for a moment does not spoil our appreciation and enjoyment of them.

In the coming weeks many of us will be fortunate enough to sit down to a warm homemade thanksgiving dinner. Its preparation demands much of the one preparing. As we gather to a table set with care, with the familiar aroma of turkey, stuffing, potatoes and gravy, and pumpkin pie, we know that we will ingest this meal rather quickly and begin the work of washing dishes and cleaning kitchen mess. But each year, we are dedicated to the preparation of this Thanksgiving feast despite the long preparation necessary for the brief experience. There is reverence for that wonderful moment of gathering in familiarity and love and taking in the abundance of life. For many, this is at least one meal before which they offer prayers of recognition and thanks to the maker of the glory of all life.

If, smack in the middle of life, we open our eyes to the wonder of love and beauty around us, our memories will be full and our hope for the future, possible. Right now we continue to live in the time of a pandemic which has brought so much suffering and fear. It has changed how we live and how we do education and business and church. But even now, we cannot wait for life to resume or to return to what was normal. We must live in love smack in the middle of it all.

“Shema Israel, Adonai, Eloheinu, Adonai, Echad.” Love God and Love your neighbor-- words so simple and yet none more profound--words often repeated, but heard by different people in different times, as ever new. Loving is an epiphany, but it is also a practice. When we practice it, it grows in depth and capacity. Together, as a church, guided by love, let us practice this love by holding together and staying in touch with the life giving and life enriching words and rituals of our faith. As

we envision the next years in the life of this congregation, this commandment must guide our ideas and our plans. It is only, the foundation for our understanding and efforts, for life goes on and significant social change happens. A nomadic society becomes an agrarian one, an industrial society becomes a technological one, the time before the Covid pandemic becomes the radically different world of today. The work of discovering who we are and imagining who we might become in a world which speeds forward at a furious pace, demands so much of us in time and energy, strangles us in a materialistic perspective, and requires a new distance from each other for our physical safety, is challenging to the soul. It seems to be, outwardly, out of sync with ancient codes of conduct. But just as the scribe who stood out in that long ago crowd and continues to stand out in the record of history as one who took to heart Jesus' message, if we can stay in touch with the charge at the center of our Christian faith, we, too, will be "not be far from the kingdom of God." If, this congregation, can "hold together" in love the foundations of its faith with its dreams and ideas for the direction of our lives and this church in the coming years, our continuity with God's help, will guide our way into an authentic and meaningful future.