

This is Us: Past

Deuteronomy 7: 6-8

This week, we are transitioning once again within our Lenten series. Over the last few weeks, we have basically explored the question of why we do what we do by telling stories connected to our community of faith. We have shared stories about a few of the holy moments which are a part of this community of faith's larger narrative, moments which shape the mission and ministry of this congregation still today. We have also shared stories, naming a few of the holy spaces in our faith life, spaces which always seem to provide us with opportunities to experience the presence of God in our midst, spaces which have become an integral part of the mission and ministry of this congregation as well. And now, this week, we are sharing the stories of the people, specifically the people who have walked these halls, people who have worshipped within this sanctuary, specifically we are sharing stories of the holy people who are the ancestors of our faith connected with Midway Christian Church.

The interesting thing is that for some of us, when we say sharing the stories of our ancestors in faith that is literally what we are doing. We are sharing stories about our blood relatives, stories about how our great, great, great, great great grandparent came to Woodford County, settled down in this area, and somehow

became connected to Midway Christian Church way back when. So every time we sit in our pew, stand at the communion table, make the chicken salad or oyster stew recipes, we have a sense of history, of connection to those who built, lead, and shaped this community of faith all those years ago.

But for others of us, when we hear the names of past leaders, that's all they are to us, names of people. Sure we are grateful for their faithfulness, their dedication, grateful for their vision of a place such as this all those years ago, but the past doesn't have the same emotional connection for us. What I mean by this is that for some of us sitting in the pews we can appreciate the history but sometimes we are left wondering about the secret code which surrounds certain objects.

Please hear me say that this tension between history and emotion concerning the past of a community of faith is not unique to our congregation. Just like us, congregations across our community, across our nation, across the world live with this same dichotomy every day. And most of the time, people don't pay much attention to it. It is just a dynamic which is part of the life of the community of faith.

However, this tension between history and emotion usually becomes more noticeable whenever difficult conversations of transformation, whenever conversations of us becoming the community of faith God calls us to be are raised.

Then as soon as the topic of change is mentioned, normally one of two reactions follow. The first reaction is someone always saying, “Well, we’ve always done it this way! Why do we need to do things differently?” And the second reaction to change is thinking that this needed change will allow us to recapture the “glory days”.

Okay, let me stop right there. I want us to have some honest conversations about these two reactions. I want us to name a few things which are preventing us from truly telling our story as the people of God. This first reaction of “We’ve always done it this way” is simply not true. We may have done it the same way for as long as anyone can remember but my guess is Midway Christian is not worshipping the same way, doing mission the same way, or even fellowshiping the same way as when it was founded in 1844. If that was the case, we would not have women elders and deacons. And we certainly would not have a female minister. This idea of “We’ve always done it this way” is part of a false narrative. It is something we have chosen to create because we are afraid. We are afraid of change. We are afraid of what it might mean for us personally, afraid of what change might mean for us as a community of faith. But most of all, we are afraid of change because we think there won’t be a place for us in the new reality, which is simply not true.

Which brings us to the second response whenever change is mentioned, that response being a want and a need to recapture the “glory days”. Well, my first question to this is which “glory days” are we talking about? I’m sure each and every one of us has a different idea of what we mean when we say the “glory days” of our church. Are we wanting to go back and recapture the 1800’s when this church was being built, knowing that also at that time, women didn’t have a vote and slavery still existed? Or are we talking about recapturing the 1950’s and 60’s when everyone went to church on Sundays, knowing also at that time our nation was separated by color? Or are we talking about recapturing some other time we fondly remember as the glory days of this church all the while not realizing we are ignoring the full picture of what was really going on in our culture at that time?

You see the difficulty with wanting to recapture the glory days is that it gives us permission to idealize the past. It allows us to see it with rose-colored glasses while denying, whether intentionally or not, while denying the complete picture of what was really going on in our midst during that time. By only seeing the glory days in part, it allows us to see what we want to see. It allows us to pretend the hurt, the conflict, the overall up’s and downs of life didn’t exist, something if we take an honest look at our own personal lives, we know is not true.

So here is what I am proposing....maybe it is time we, as people of faith, when looking at our past, name that neither of these reactions is. Maybe it is time

we as people of faith when looking at our past, when having these difficult conversations of change, maybe it is time we realize that there is another way, a way which gives us roots while allowing us to vision our future as well without losing one single thing. This life giving way of transformation comes to us in our Scripture today.

When we look at our text, we realize Moses is sharing his last will and testament as a leader. He is giving his final words of advice to the people of Israel before they cross over into the promise land, sort of like he is a parent talking to his children before they go and play at someone else's house. You know the talk we all got... We were to listen. We were to play nice with others. We were to be respectful and if we needed anything, don't hesitate to call., right?

So here in Deuteronomy, Moses is giving the same type of talk to the people of Israel. He is reminding them of their covenantal agreement with God and with one another. He is reminding them that this covenant has implications for how they live out their faith as the people of God. He is reminding the people that God has chosen them to be God's people.

Now here is where I would argue Moses needs to work on his technique when it comes to pep talks because Moses goes on to say to the people of Israel, "Before you start thinking you are more special than any other group, I need to tell

you a harsh truth. That is simply not the case. As a people, you didn't earn God's favor. As a people, you didn't earn God's grace. Moses tells the people of Israel that God chose them because God made a promise to their ancestors. God made a promise to Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars.

What Moses is basically telling the people of Israel is that their connection, their history is not about them. It has always been about God. It has always been about God's faithfulness to God's people. Their history is a testament to them and to the world to God's integrity shown to the ones God has named and claimed as God's own.

Think about that for a moment. Seeing our history, seeing our past this way changes everything. What if in looking back at our past as individuals, as a community of faith, we step back and see the larger picture. We can see that from the beginning God has lead us, that God has inspired us, that God has challenged us as God's people. We can see that our history as a testament to God's wisdom, which has always been there to guide God's people.

By looking back at our history, at our past this way, it becomes something for all of us. It becomes something which connects us with one another. It becomes something which gives us a better understanding of who we are now and who we hope to become as a community of faith. Because now our history, our past is an

opportunity for us now and forevermore, to know that we can trust in the promises given to us by our God.

I want us to take a look at the front of our bulletin. Some of these faces a few of us will recognize. Others not so much. As we look at their faces, we realize that we no longer need to fear change. We no longer need to worry about our place in the new reality which awaits us. Their faces, their stories of faith, their stories of service show us that God is always there for God's people, no matter what.

We look at these faces and if we listen closely, we can hear them telling us that God has led this community of faith since its beginning and God is not going to stop now. We can look at these faces and know that God has led God's people through change before and God will do so again.

Or as one church member put it as we were looking at pictures from this church's past, "Think about all the people who have walked through these doors, generation after generation, some families still sitting in these pews. Think about what all they saw and experienced as part of the mission and ministry of Midway Christian Church. Think about how that vision in 1844 for a church in Midway has come to fruition. Think about all the people who have carried on the message of Welcome and how we now are invited to continue their legacy."

They remind us that God has chosen us to be God's people...all because God made a promise to our ancestors a long time ago. And for God to be the God we know and trust, God will always keep that promise made to God's people.

So today and all days, as we remember and celebrate our past as a community of faith, may we remember that what we do here in worship, in mission, in fellowship, in study as Midway Christian Church is part of a larger legacy. It is a story about how love and hope came into being through Jesus Christ and transformed the world. It is the story of how our everyday lives are intertwined with the holy and sacred. It is a story about how we are transforming into the people of hope, the people of love, the people of WELCOME God calls us to be so that the Kingdom of God comes to life more and more here on this Earth. So Midway Christian Church, both past, present and future....in worship, in fellowship, in mission, and in study...This is Us, telling our story as the people of God. Amen.