

The Rev. Robert H. Malm  
September 2, 2018  
The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

### **“Will our children have faith?”**

The Book of Deuteronomy is often called “Moses’ Farewell Address.” It is the fifth and last book in the Pentateuch, the heart of the sacred scriptures for ancient Israel. What we sometimes call the “Law” in the Old Testament in contrast to the other parts: the History, the Prophets, and the Writings.

Deuteronomy is Moses’ encouragement to Israel at the end of the 40 years of exodus from slavery in Egypt. The people are beyond the Jordan in Moab. Moses has been their faithful leader all these years – escaping from Egypt, crossing the Red Sea, journeying through the wilderness. Moses has introduced Israel to the 10 Commandments, the renewal of the covenant made centuries before. And God brings Moses to the top of Mount Nebo. He can see the valleys of the Promised Land stretched out before his view. God tells him, “This is the land of which I spoke to Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob. I will give it to your descendants. I have let you see it with your own eyes, but you shall not go over there... (Deut. 34:1-6). So, Joshua leads the people of Israel into the Promised Land.

In this “farewell address” Moses wants the people of Israel to remember and observe the teaching, the commandments, the covenant that defines the relationship of the chosen people with God. He writes, “take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor let them slip from your mind... make them known to your children and your children’s children...”

What a wonderful encouragement as the new school year starts. What powerful words to remember as our program year and Christian education begins at Grace in two weeks. What a message for us to take to Shrine Mont next weekend for our parish retreat as we celebrate “One Grace Fellowship of Love” based on the old hymn...

When I first looked at the reading from Deuteronomy appointed for today, I remembered a very important book written more than 40 years ago, “Will Our Children Have Faith?” The author, John Westerhoff, was a Harvard-educated United Church of Christ minister and editor before going to teach at Duke in the mid-1970s. Just a few years after writing this book in 1976, he became an Episcopal priest!

Westerhoff’s book and teaching revolutionized Christian education. He affirmed that to grow in our faith, we must experience faith; we must be formed in a community that lives out the Gospel; God’s story needs to become our story; we need opportunities for ministry, for service, for celebration. He wanted to see instruction change to what he called “faith enculturation.” Our J2A program, mission trips, and so much more of our formation program all grow out of his understanding that every Christian passes through stages of faith development: from faith given to faith questioned to faith owned.

Jesus was first known as a wise teacher, a rabbi, who opened people's hearts and minds to God's love and the relationship that we can have with God. Jesus taught "as one who had authority, and not as the scribes (and Pharisees)" (Matthew 7:29). People found Jesus' teaching to be astonishing, liberating, penetrating, healing. Crowds flocked to hear him. We have four Gospel records of his teaching and his life.

As we begin this new season, perhaps we should return to knowing Jesus first as our teacher, then as our Lord. What can we continue to learn from scripture, the biblical lessons we hear on Sundays, the reading and studying we do on our own? You've heard me say many times that BIBLE stands for "Basic Instruction Before Leaving Earth." Let's not forget this "basic instruction."

A good place to begin is with Jesus' reminder, "...it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come..." Jesus is concerned with what is in our hearts. He warned about hypocrisy. Actions speak louder than words. I think our children will have faith, if we have a faith to teach them through our actions, in our life together, in this parish church, in our homes and schools. We can never forget Jesus' final words to his disciples, "Go... make disciples... baptize... teach them to observe all that I have commanded you... and know that I am with you... always" (Matthew 28:19).

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9  
James 1:17-27  
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23