

“The church of our ancestors”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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Deuteronomy 30:15-20 and 1 Corinthians 3:1-9

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The other day, my dad and I were talking about how we've got just boxes of stuff from his parents and my mom's parents and their parent's parents. We've got papers and photos and plates and old chairs and tables and books and on and on. Some of it's special; they come with real memories. And some of it you're just holding onto because who else would? We owe it to them. It's a piece of them. But at some point, you've got to ask: do you really need three sets of china? Who needs four dining room tables? How significant is a tax return from 1950? We want to do right by our ancestors, because we love them, but sometimes maybe we get turned around.

It's easy to do.

The Bible talks a lot about the people who came before—not just because their blood runs in your blood, but because they passed on the faith. When Moses meets God in the burning bush, God says, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”

When we get to our reading in Deuteronomy today, the Israelites are determined to do right by their ancestors. Abraham traveled so far. Joseph faced prison and slavery. Think of Jacob's travails, Isaac nearly being sacrificed on the mountain. So many people worked so hard to get them to this point. Now, as they stand on the edge of the Promised Land, at the end of their 40 years in the wilderness, Moses tells them that if they want to prosper in this land, they're going to have to make the right choice.

In the same way, imagine the pressure the people of the early church must have felt. They've got all those ancestors too: Abraham, Jacob. But they've also got the prophets. They've got all the people who went through exile, who came home and rebuilt the temple. And now—woah, they've got the very Son of God, Jesus, and his disciples. How do they possibly live up to that?

We may feel that way. We look at these empty pews, this culture, and we may feel that we are living in the shadow of the glory of those who built and grew this church. Like somehow we've got to keep up, or we're letting them down.

Today, after worship, we are having an important conversation about the financial future of the church, bequeathed to us by our ancestors. We're OK right now. We've got a generous endowment. But we are seeing signs that, if unattended, could be a problem in the future: a deficit in the operating budget, an increasingly unsustainable dependence on the financial gifts of our ancestors. And we are facing some major capital needs that we aren't sure how most faithfully to pay for. This can cause some very real and understandable feelings, from fear to avoidance.

It's easy for differences, especially over money, especially over our ancestors' money, to lead to conflict. It can lead to that "quarreling" we heard Paul talk about in 1 Corinthians, some saying, "I belong to Paul," others saying, "I belong to Apollos." It can divide a church into factions, each following different leaders, different philosophies.

For instance, we might have some who are of the mindset that our endowment is to be protected at all costs. Use it little, grow it more. Others might say that if we've got it, let's use it. Both sides of that debate may think the other is being unfaithful to the work and intent of our ancestors.

I heard this concern when we were talking about whether to restore the organ: Didn't we owe it to the people who purchased the organ to keep it going? I hear this concern when we talk about our scholarships or the buildings and grounds. I hear it when we remember longingly programs like Music and More. These people and their stories matter to us. We want to honor them and continue their work.

So, when Moses is giving his final sermon, we might expect him to spend a lot of time looking to the past and asking them to preserve what their grandparents started. But Moses doesn't do that. He cares about those ancestors. But he doesn't do that. Instead, he says, "Choose life." Choose life today. "Today" is repeated four times in six verses, as if desperate to pull them out of the past into the present. What matters are the choices they make now, today. This is one of few times in the Old Testament when the word "choose" (*bāḥar*) is used with humans as the subject. Most times, it's God making the choice. But this time, as they face a future of many possibilities, some good, some bad, they are given the power to choose.

Moses doesn't say: choose to serve your ancestors. Moses says: choose to serve God. Do what is faithful, today. Do what furthers compassion and justice, today. Do what loves God, obeys God, holds fast to God, today. L'Chaim! Choose life today.

In the same way, Paul tells the church in Corinth that it's not about Paul or Apollos. It's not about Abraham or Joseph, not about Peter or John, not about Henry Fowler or Douglas Gilchrist, not about Midge Drummond or Doris Bierer or any other saint—God bless them. It's about God. God is the One behind all this, and God is the One you serve. Who are those saintly ancestors? Paul asks. He answers: "Servants through whom you came to believe." They are important. They deserve our gratitude, our love, and our memory. But they are servants of God, not masters. We do not belong to them. We belong to Christ. "For we are God's servants," says Paul, "working together; you are God's field, God's building."

How do we best serve the legacy of our ancestors? We don't. We serve God. Just as, we hope, they did. Ironically, that is the best way to honor them: to do what they did, to love and serve God as unequivocally, as courageously, as selflessly, as they did. To live today.

When we are all serving God, then those divisions, as Paul says, go away. Disagreements will remain. We may hear them today. Disagreements are important. They are the product of a system that encourages critical thinking, diversity, and freedom of thought. They are productive because

we all, as Paul says elsewhere, “see through a glass darkly,” with imperfect understanding. We get things wrong. We need disagreements to hone our thinking, to grow and improve, and to gain understanding of each other.

We may have different ideas about what to do with our endowment, our stewardship and capital campaigns, our buildings, our ministries and budget priorities. That’s OK. Because we will know that we are all serving the same purpose: to be faithful to God. Those who want to keep the endowment aren’t hoarding it; they are maintaining a foundation for this church’s future. They are reminding us that we are as responsible for sustaining the work of the gospel as our ancestors were. Likewise, those who want to spend the endowment aren’t being reckless; they are putting available resources to use in service of God’s church and mission in the world. There are needs now, so let’s meet them.

Two different answers, both faithful, because they are in service of the same question: What does God want?

This was the same process we used for the organ. We asked whether a restored organ would further the gospel, deepen worship, and witness to the love of God. This congregation decided the answer was yes. Not because it’s what our ancestors wanted a hundred years ago, but because it’s what God wanted today.

It was that very question that led to the formation of this church, separating Central Presbyterian from their ancestors, because God was calling the people of this church to abolish slavery. It was that same question that led us to unite with two congregations, who left behind their buildings and all their ancestors had built; in turn, this church left behind its name for the sake of taking the name of the other. In more recent years, the faithful have labored to make this church look different from the church of our ancestors, no longer a seat of wealth and privilege, but an economically diverse, community engaged, all-welcoming congregation that loves and empowers people with disabilities and isn’t afraid to put feet to pavement in service of the love and justice of God.

Westminster has often been brave in the face of uncertainty, choosing to live and serve God. So, wherever these financial conversations take us, let us be brave too. Let us be bold in our action, trusting that we do not act alone, but that God goes this way with us, and whatever happens, God will be there to grow life in unexpected ways.

We choose life whenever we remember that we serve the God of our ancestors, not our ancestors themselves. We are grateful for what they have passed on to us. We remember their stories. We honor and love them. But this is not their church. It’s not even your or my church. This is God’s church. God’s will be done. **Amen.**