**Constrained by Love**

**Deuteronomy 34:1-12   
Matthew 22:34-46**

It is probably a mistake on my part to tell you this story. You may wonder, what kind of parent was he any way? Or you may ask yourself, how badly were his children damaged by their upbringing? Certainly they are going to need a fair amount of therapy. In my defense, I grew up with an uncle who lived with us and loved to tease. It was part of our daily life.

Michele and I always made time for family meals. Ours took place at our kitchen table. We naturally tried to get our kids to eat their vegetables and all the other things kids might just as soon avoid. They, of course, never turned their nose up at ice-cream. When they had finished their meal and it was time for desert, I would set their ice-cream in front of them and then I would say in a various serious voice, “you can look it, but you can’t eat it.”

I can tell already, you are starting to think “oh those poor children. If we’d only known”. “You can look at it, but you can’t eat it” That’s what I said. It held them back for just a short while before they figured out part of the game was having a safe place to defy a rule that made no sense, even to children two and four.

Our text from Exodus reminds me of this game I played with our kids, except in Moses case, it’s no game. God is serious. Moses is the one who, at great risk to his own life, defies Pharaoh leading the Israelites out of slavery toward the promised land of freedom. Moses is the one who spends forty years traveling with the people in the wilderness as they struggles to become a community grounded in a spirit of freedom, rather than the captivity which they had known. Moses leads them through one crisis after the other. The Israelites are finally, long last, on the edge of entering the land of promise. God has brought Moses to the top of Mount Nebo from which Moses is given a panoramic view of this land promised to Abraham & Sarah, Isaac & Rebecca and Jacob, Rachel and Leah and the land about which Moses has dreamed all his adult life. Moses stands there gazing out at this wonderful panorama we call the Promised Land. Then God says to Moses, “You can look at it, but you can’t go there.”

I don’t know about you, but I would have found that a little frustrating. Moses is by now old, but he is in fine health. The text tells us his “sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated”. Moses is quite capable of leading the people into the Promised Land and enjoying this moment for which he had given so much of his life. “You can look at it, but you can’t go there.”

It is, of course, possible to imagine why God might want Moses to stay behind, rather than continue leading the people. Moses has been in this central role for forty years. From God’s point of view it may be that it is important for the future of the people that this time of transition also be a time for new leadership to emerge. Joshua is ready to go. He has been mentored by Moses. He, of course, will bring his own style and it may in fact be a style that is better suited for this new beginning than is the style of leadership required for the wilderness.

The real question this story poses is why do we hear nothing from Moses? How come there is no argument? How come there is no bargaining with God. “How about if I just cross over and then let Joshua take the lead?” Moses has argued and bargained with God before. But, now Moses is quiet and apparently ready to stay right where he is.

I have seen plenty of situations where leaders are unwilling to let go, step aside, no matter how much the circumstance might suggest it is the best thing to do. There have been a number of UCC and Presbyterian churches close over the years because the remaining members would rather keep a firm grip on their leadership, rather than let some new, younger members take the lead. This is no easy thing God is asking Moses to do. “You can look, but you can’t go there.”

Whatever constrains Moses, whatever keeps him from resisting God’s purpose; it must be a powerful, strong influence in his life. If Moses did what he wanted to do, if he simply went with what felt good to him, Moses would have been the first one crossing the River Jordan. No one would deny he has earned the right to lead his people and yet, something holds Moses back so that rather than acting on these natural impulses, his own desire, he does instead what God desires.

Moses, of course, is far from alone in experiencing this type of situation in which we find our desires, our natural impulses being constrained by another desire, another powerful influence. Shortly after I was ordained into the ministry I found myself boarding a return flight to Pittsburgh following a short visit home to my family in Minnesota. At the time I had a beard, which I have now, though then without the grey. I had long hair, which I don’t have now. I also was wearing sandals.

When I approached the ticket agent, he looked at me and he said, “you can not board the plane with those sandals.” I asked why and he said it was a safety issue. The woman before me was wearing sandals and it apparently was not a safety issue for her. I said fine, I will take them off and put on shoes when I get to the gate. He said, “no, if you want your ticket, you will put your shoes on right now.” A lot of things went through my mind as to what I might say to this agent. And yet, there was something holding me back. Perhaps someone else might have found the right words, but the words available to me in that moment were being constrained from something that was a powerful pull. I put on my shoes.

A couple years ago Michele and I were in Chicago riding bike along the shores of Lake Michigan. It was a glorious Fall day. We were on a bike trail, riding side by side, when we noticed someone who was quickly approaching from behind. He had given no warning as bike riders commonly do. Michele pulled to the left, I hesitated for a moment, undecided if it was safer to pull over with Michele or pull to the right and let him go down the middle. I pulled to the right. As he road by he yelled, “why don’t you make up your mind.” I instinctively yelled back, “Have a nice day.” Michele said, “Don’t be sarcastic.” Apparently my “have a nice day” sounded a little less than sincere. The thing is, “have a nice day” was a lot nicer than most of the other things that went through my mind. Something was constraining me from saying what I really wanted to say.

What is it that constrains Moses from letting his desires, his impulses be the determining factor in the choices he makes? What is this influence that has the power to slow us down, cause us to change course, and live in ways that are at times at odds with our own instincts?

In our Gospel today Jesus is challenged by Pharisees who pose the question, “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” These religious leaders have even less affection for Jesus than that ticket agent or that bike rider had for me. Jesus answers their question by saying, “'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." Later, Jesus makes it more challenging still by reminding us our neighbor includes ticket agents and bike riders who feel nothing like the type of neighbors we would choose.

Could this love which Jesus says is at the core of our faith be the constraint that causes Moses to put the desires of God, the needs of the people ahead of his own desires? Could it be it is this love at work in our lives that continues to pull at our hearts and our souls?

I will be honest, there is a part of me that is just as resistant to the idea of being constrained by love as my kids were when I told them “you can look, but can’t taste.” I struggle with the words in our closing hymn “Jesu, Jesu, Fill Us with Your Love,” which speak about our relationship to Jesus as that of a slave. “Loving puts us on our knees, serving as though we are slaves.”

I prefer to think of myself as free from constraints and yet what else is it other than love at work in our lives that keeps us from returning hatred with more hatred? What is it other than the constraint of love that causes us to care about people it would be easy to ignore? What is it other than the constraint of love that moves us to forgive when we would rather hold onto our grievances? What is it other than the constraint of love that causes us to put needs of the community ahead of our own individual desires? What is it other than the constraint of love that causes us to put people ahead of long held beliefs, caring ahead of principles we hold dear? What is it other than the constraint of love that causes us to take a prophetic stand, when we would rather keep our head down, play it safe, avoid the conflict or the challenge?

Moses led the people out of slavery in Egypt into the promised land of freedom. We often think freedom means we can do whatever we want, whenever we want, because we are free. Moses knows differently, as does Jesus. True freedom is to know the constraint of loving God with all your heart, soul and mind and to love your neighbor as yourself.

**Deuteronomy 34:1-12**   
*In our first lesson the Israelites are poised to enter the Promised Land. For forty years they have journeyed in the wilderness. Now they are ready to enter the life about which they have dreamed. Moses, however, discovers he will not be joining the people. God brings Moses to the top of the mountain where Moses is invited to look out on the land of Promise that he himself will never enter.*

Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the Lord showed him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, the Negeb, and the Plain — that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees — as far as Zoar. The Lord said to him, "This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants'; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there." Then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord's command. He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day. Moses was one hundred and twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated. The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab for thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended.  
  
Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him; and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the Lord had commanded Moses.  
  
Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord 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.

**Matthew 22:34-46**  
*In our Gospel lesson, religious leaders who have little love for Jesus, try to trap Jesus with a question about the commandments. Without hesitating Jesus replies with an answer that has continued to be at the heart of our faith ever since.*

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."  
  
Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying,  
   'The Lord said to my Lord,  
    "Sit at my right hand,  
       until I put your enemies under your feet"'?  
"If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.