

Learning to love stubborn people

[Augsburg University Chapel, 6 March 2024]

Deuteronomy 9: 13-21

Furthermore the LORD said to me, "I have seen that this people is indeed a stubborn people. Let me alone that I may destroy them and blot out their name from under heaven; and I will make of you a nation mightier and more numerous than they."

So I turned and went down from the mountain, while the mountain was ablaze; the two tablets of the covenant were in my two hands. Then I saw that you had indeed sinned against the LORD your God, by casting for yourselves an image of a calf; you had been quick to turn from the way that the LORD had commanded you. So I took hold of the two tablets and flung them from my two hands, smashing them before your eyes. Then I lay prostrate before the LORD as before, forty days and forty nights; I neither ate bread nor drank water, because of all the sin you had committed, provoking the LORD by doing what was evil in his sight. For I was afraid that the anger that the LORD bore against you was so fierce that he would destroy you. But the LORD listened to me that time also. The LORD was so angry with Aaron that he was ready to destroy him, but I interceded also on behalf of Aaron at that same time. Then I took the sinful thing you had made, the calf, and burned it with fire and crushed it, grinding it thoroughly, until it was reduced to dust; and I threw the dust of it into the stream that runs down the mountain.

Hebrews 3:12-19

Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partners of Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end. As it is said, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion." Now who were they who heard and yet were rebellious? Was it not all those who left Egypt under the leadership of Moses? But with whom was he angry forty years? Was it not those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, if not to those who were disobedient? So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.

I remember the first time I heard the phrase from my youngest, Maya. It was one night when I was trying diligently to get her to go to bed. She looked up at me after one of my exhortations about bedtime and yelled "Never." Which became her ready response. Never, never, never. She was a stubborn child, and I love her so much.

So, how do we do this, learn to love stubborn people?

We have a remarkable guide to this question in our reading from Deuteronomy. We're talking about a whole new level of stubbornness here. These are the stubborn chosen people. These are the Israelites, ransomed out of exile in Egypt, on their extended journey to the promised land. But they're not happy with this wilderness sojourn, they want to

reach their destination, they want what they believe is theirs. And their stubbornness has led them to worship false gods, to build their idols, to question Jehovah's fidelity, to anger the Lord so much that their very existence is threatened.

And in this familiar scene from cinematic history, here comes their leader, Moses, down from the mountaintop, carrying the sacred tablets of the Ten Commandments, coming upon the chosen people worshipping a golden calf, sinning against their God. In response, Moses throws the tablets to the ground, smashing the commandments, and then there follows this astonishing example of servant leadership as Moses prostrates himself before the Lord for 40 days and nights, denying himself even the basics of human need, assuaging God's anger against God's people, destroying the idol and casting its dust into the river so that it might be gone from their presence.

And we, of course, know the rest of the story. The journey in the wilderness continues some forty years; the Israelite's stubbornness and wickedness continues; Moses delivers the law of the commandments, a sign of God's renewed covenant with God's people; and ultimately these stubborn people reach the promised land – though their leader does not cross over with them, the price he must pay for the stubborn people he loved.

There are important lessons here for all of us learning to love stubborn people, to love each other.

First, it is clear that we need intercessors. We need our Moses. We need prayers of intercession surely, but we also need people who are willing to prostrate themselves before the Lord on our behalf, to bear the anger intended for us and to make the sacrifice required. We are all stubborn people, set in our ways, sure that we are right all the time, entitled to our due, chasing after false gods who we hope might bring us a quicker, easier way to success and fortune. Who will stand for us, loving us despite our stubbornness? Who will speak truth to our stubbornness? Who will bring us the promises that will sustain and guide us in our own wildernesses?

Second, we need forgiveness. We need to know that, despite our stubbornness, there is the possibility of redemption. We need to know that the smashed tablets will be renewed. We need to learn to forgive each other, perhaps the moral skill we most need in our contemporary lives, knowing that our stubbornness likely will abide as we traverse the wilderness of our lives, but also knowing that we will survive to keep on our journey. We all know that forgiveness is easier to offer when someone

admits his or her sin. But the truth is, stubborn people aren't very good at repenting – are we?

Finally, we must learn to see the arc of God's grace. Forty years seems like a long time to wander in the wilderness. We feel for the Israelites; surely this was cruel and unusual punishment – it was a promise, wasn't it? And as stubborn people, we too want our due as soon as possible. But God's time is not ours – thank heavens for that – and our impatience clearly exacerbates our stubbornness, leading us to turn away again and again from the love of a gracious God. Yet God keeps God's promises – the arc of God's goodness and grace is sure. Are we willing to wait to see how much God loves God's stubborn people?

There are parent lessons here. Maya's brother was a good intercessor for his little sister, explaining, standing in for her, urging me to understand. My suggestions that Maya say she is sorry are met with a resounding “never” and yet how can I not forgive her – and try again to get her into bed? And surely the arc of grace is a reminder that sooner or later she did grow up and on to more mature forms of stubbornness. My stubborn child whom I love so much.

All of us will agree, I assume, that our own times offer myriad examples of stubbornness – in our own community, in our economic lives, in the world. We are stubborn people who need intercessors and forgiveness and a longer view of God's goodness. We want our university to keep its promises. We want our financial systems to work for our benefits. We want our politics to be aimed at our needs and interests. And when it doesn't happen as we would like, we turn away – to our fears, to false gods, to the easy fix, to tearing down those who would guide us to a better place.

This morning, I call us back as God's faithful people, stubborn still but redeemed as well, to the good news that, as the author of the letter to the Hebrews says, we are partners with Christ, disciples of the one who has interceded for us, who has died to forgive our sins, and who has offered us a horizon of abundant love and grace that is ours from our gracious God.

I've always liked the essayist Annie Lamott's line, “I went around saying for a long time that I am not one of those Christians who is heavily into forgiveness—that I am one of the other kind.” Funny for sure, but perhaps more true than we would like to admit, the stubborn people we are. And yet there is but one way to be faithful, to follow our God who loves us so much – despite our stubbornness – and that is the way of discipleship. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. We are stubborn people, my friends, and our God loves us so much; so much that God sent God's only Son

into the world to save us from our stubbornness. Thanks be to God.
Amen, amen, amen.