

“Our Great Heritage: Christian Education”

If you really want to remember something that is very important to you, what do you do? There may be many answers, but allow me to suggest a few: spend some time thinking about it, talk about it, and share it with others.

Our Scripture lessons today, and in particular the sermon text from Deuteronomy 11, speak to us about the importance of remembering. Specifically, they are about remembering what God has done and what his Word has told us. They stress the importance of remembering for us, and the importance of working so that our children also remember. As we shall see, this focus on keeping God's Word and his works in our hearts and minds was important not only for Old Testament Israel, but was also a major emphasis of the Lutheran Reformation and has remained important to this day.

The Israelites to whom the words of Deuteronomy 11 were first addressed were in a unique position. They were God's own chosen people on the verge of entering the Promised Land. They had recently come out of Egypt, where they had been forced into slavery and hard labor. They were abused and mistreated. They had cried out to the Lord for help, and finally he sent help. Through Moses, God did many miraculous signs. He sent plagues on the Egyptians until finally they agreed to let his people go. And Moses led the people out of Egypt and toward the Promised Land.

On their way, God gave the people his law. He told them in no uncertain terms what their consciences no doubt already told them: there were certain things that were absolutely wrong and should not be done by anyone ever. God also gave them regulations both for how to worship him and for how to organize themselves as a nation. And forty years after leaving Egypt, the Israelites were assembled just east of that Promised Land, almost ready to cross the Jordan River and to receive what God had promised to them. That's when Moses repeated and expounded on God's laws for them. He essentially preached a sermon for them about their lives and their relationship with God. That's what is recorded for us throughout Deuteronomy, including the words of our text from chapter 11.

How could anyone forget what had happened? How could anyone forget what God had done for the people? He had sent 10 plagues on the Egyptians. He had divided the waters of the Red Sea so that Israel could cross on dry land, but the Egyptians were drowned when he allowed the waters to rush back to their place. When his own people disobeyed his direct orders, he punished them in a very public way as the earth opened up to swallow them and their households. These were amazing and striking events, forever etched in the memories of those who had seen them! Yet the history of God's people showed that they didn't always remember these things. In their sinful stubbornness, they needed to learn the same lessons over and over again! They doubted God's love, and his power, and his faithfulness. They whined and grumbled and complained instead of trusting him and loving him.

Most importantly, the people often forgot what God had said to them. He had used these powerful events to remind the people of his love for them. And he had used these events as shadows and reminders of the promises he had made to them. He would not leave them alone. He would bless them in the Promised Land to the extent that they followed his decrees, and he would one day send their Savior from sin.

If even the people who themselves had seen God's mighty hand at work sometimes forgot what he had done and what it meant in their lives, how much more their children who had not seen these things? God wanted to make sure that these things were passed down, and that they were given the emphasis and the repetition that they deserved. He wanted to make sure that succeeding generations were trained and educated to know these events and the promises that he had attached to them. He wanted the people to make his words a central part of their everyday lives. This is how he described it through Moses: **“Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.”** God knew, and Moses knew, the sinful nature of people that would cause them to wander away from these words. If they

did, they would serve other gods and not the true God. They would fail to keep their end of the special covenant God had made with them. God would withhold the blessings that he had offered to them in that land. And they would ultimately forget even that great promise of a Savior.

That's not what God wanted for them. He wanted them to enjoy the blessings awaiting them in a good and productive land. He wanted generation after generation to follow his decrees and to know in their hearts that he was their Savior-God. And so he instructed them: meditate on these words. Think about them. Let them be in your hearts and on your minds. Bind them on yourselves and in your houses. Talk to your children about them. In the morning, in the evening, when you are coming, when you are going, make God's Word a part of your thinking and living. What a blessing it was when the people did this! And what a disappointment when they did not!

We have used the term "Christian education" as the theme of our service today. There may be any number of different aspects of Christian education that you think about when you hear that term. But for our purposes, we mean what is spoken about in these verses: that we keep God's Word as a central, vital, fundamental part of our lives and the lives of our children. We mean that we focus on building on the solid rock of God's own Word and not on any other foundation. It means that we recognize our own sinful natures that cause us to wander from that Word and to ignore it, and that we look to God's own promises for forgiveness and strength.

This is indeed part of the rich heritage that has been passed down to us from the time of the Lutheran reformers. As we have been discussing in our Summer Series, Luther and the other reformers were blessed with the opportunity to rediscover what the Bible said. They grew up in a church that kept hidden the precious truths about what God had done for them and said to them. They didn't hear the wonderful message that God saved them by grace alone through faith. They didn't hear the message that in Christ and Christ alone they had the full and free forgiveness of all of their sins and therefore had life and salvation. But as they read and studied the Bible for themselves, they learned all these things. They thought that once the word was out, no one would possibly forget these great things that God had done.

But then they found out otherwise. Around 1529, Luther and colleagues of his visited many of the churches in their territory, Saxony. The pastors and people of the churches said that they agreed with Luther and the reformers. But on these visits it became clear that the people, and even their pastors, didn't really know what Luther was teaching. For the most part, they were completely unsure of what the Bible said. There are some basic Bible teachings, excellent starting places for teaching and knowing the faith, like the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed. But the people didn't even know these things or what they meant.

So Luther wrote two important books. We have come to know them as catechisms. Luther wrote a Small Catechism that took these basic teachings of the Bible and explained them in relatively short and simple ways. Maybe you recall how he taught the first commandment: "you shall have no other gods." He explained what this meant by saying, "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things." And with so many other memorable phrases, he explained the meaning of God's Word for God's people. The Large Catechism also was a companion book that went even deeper into these teachings. These books are so simple and yet so profound that we still use them as a basis of our instruction in God's Word.

So also today we joyfully celebrate the Lutheran heritage of Christian education. We have the most important message ever. It is one that we will want to remember for all time. It tells us that even though we would worship all sorts of things as "god" if we were left on our own, the true God has made and kept his promises to us. His Son Jesus died for our sins and promises us eternal life in heaven with him. We want to remember, and we want others to remember.

So what do we do? Well, as a congregation, we have supported some very specific efforts at Christian education in our Lutheran schools, Redeemer and Arizona Lutheran Academy. Those schools are places where children learn in an environment where they are surrounded by God's Word!

But there's so much more to Christian education for us and for our children. It is making God's Word part of not just our Sunday mornings, but our everyday lives. It is taking time to meditate on the wonderful promises

of God and the way that those promises affect us and the way we live. It is teaching and instructing our children and encouraging parents and children, supporting their efforts. It is telling others and encouraging them to grow in their faith. I'll mention just one other way that we do this as a congregation, and that is through Bible studies on Sunday mornings and at other times during the week. Yes, these things may mean some extra effort and some extra time, but they are absolutely worth it!

You are here today, I expect, because you recognize how important it is to know that Jesus loves you and gave his life for you. You are here because that is something that you never want to forget. Take some time today to consider these words and to think of one way, or maybe two, that you will apply them in your life. Let God's Word be in your heart, on your mind, and on your lips, in all aspects of your life.

The Text: Deuteronomy 11:1-7 (NIV)

Love the Lord your God and keep his requirements, his decrees, his laws and his commands always.

² Remember today that your children were not the ones who saw and experienced the discipline of the Lord your God: his majesty, his mighty hand, his outstretched arm; ³ the signs he performed and the things he did in the heart of Egypt, both to Pharaoh king of Egypt and to his whole country; ⁴ what he did to the Egyptian army, to its horses and chariots, how he overwhelmed them with the waters of the Red Sea as they were pursuing you, and how the Lord brought lasting ruin on them. ⁵ It was not your children who saw what he did for you in the wilderness until you arrived at this place, ⁶ and what he did to Dathan and Abiram, sons of Eliab the Reubenite, when the earth opened its mouth right in the middle of all Israel and swallowed them up with their households, their tents and every living thing that belonged to them. ⁷ But it was your own eyes that saw all these great things the Lord has done.

Deuteronomy 11:16-21 (NIV)

¹⁶ Be careful, or you will be enticed to turn away and worship other gods and bow down to them. ¹⁷ Then the Lord's anger will burn against you, and he will shut up the heavens so that it will not rain and the ground will yield no produce, and you will soon perish from the good land the Lord is giving you. ¹⁸ Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. ¹⁹ Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. ²⁰ Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates, ²¹ so that your days and the days of your children may be many in the land the Lord swore to give your ancestors, as many as the days that the heavens are above the earth.