

***“Some Conversations” Deuteronomy 34:1-12; I Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-46  
Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17 10-23-05***

As if you cannot guess, I was at a terrible loss when it came time to decide on the title for this morning's sermon. I read and re-read the scriptures looking for that common element that would tie them all together. Sometimes the theme that is present is startlingly so and the sermon preparer cannot miss it. Then there are those other times of which this was one. I smiled a bit to myself and recalled the wisdom of so many of my colleagues who may read all three scriptures but decide to preach on just one of them setting aside the others for another day. I realized how wise they were, indeed. However, I believe if all three are read, somehow all three need to be reflected upon and integrated into a sermon for better or for worse. Surprisingly, as the sermon took on a life of its own, the important role the art of conversation has throughout our Bible became clear. Both those times of conversation between humans and with God.

First of all, I thought of Moses' disappointment with dying before he actually entered the "Promised Land" after all those years of struggling to keep the nation Israel together and on track as he faithfully led them across the wilderness. There it was, the "land flowing with milk and honey" just beyond reach and his time had come to go and be with God. I am sure most of us might have some mixed emotions over the seeming unfairness of this. But, there is no comment from Moses, just a glowing epitaph to signal the end of his devoted service to God and to his nation. Most deaths I have witnessed are a peaceful acceptance of the end. Moses was old and certainly full of years and his end came naturally and with an acceptance of God's will for him. The mission had passed into younger hands and would be carried out by Joshua.

Deuteronomy is the last book of the first five of the Hebrew Bible attributed to Moses. These books are collectively known as the Pentateuch or Torah—the Law. They contain the guidelines for the life of Israel beyond the person of Moses.

In these five opening books, as we have seen through the past several months, Moses and others had many conversations with God. It seems amazing that from the opening pages of Genesis and God's conversations with Adam and Eve to these last words in the book of Deuteronomy, rules for successful living, that God would like us to follow, were spelled out that have endured to this day.

Those rules and regulations were well known by Jesus. Yet, when asked by some tricky Pharisees which were the most important commandments, Jesus created a new standard of living; one that was easy to grasp, one that came from all of those other rules and regulations. He simply said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And a second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments, all the prophets and the law rest.

The Pharisees were speechless. They probably had asked the question with what they considered the right answer in their minds. They never expected what he would say in response. And they left him alone—at least for a while.

Jesus was telling those who had ears and could hear, that these two commandments, so easy to say and remember, yet so difficult to fulfill are all that matter in the living of our lives. If we have been involved in the life of a faith community to any extent, we have heard these commandments over and over again. Sometimes they are slightly reworded but the essential

meaning is always present. We must wonder what our world might be like if we were willing and able to integrate those two commandments fully into our lives.

It is a difficult task to love God above all other things and people. No matter how well intentioned we might be, life intrudes and changes our focus. As for loving our neighbors as ourselves, well, that is even more difficult. Our neighbors are not like us and asking us to love them as we love ourselves is a formidable task. Sometimes we are not even certain just who our neighbors are. But both of these commandments deserve our focus and, perhaps, if we give them any thought, inch by inch, we will move toward fulfilling them.

All of Paul's letters were conversations. Usually they were written in response to questions he had received from the different churches he or others had founded in the Mediterranean region. So, while we do not have the letters sent by the churches, we have Paul's answers and we can reconstruct the difficulties they were facing. In the reading from I Thessalonians, Paul reminds his readers that he came to them with the purest of intentions and with the best in mind for them. He encouraged each and every church he touched through his correspondence to remain strong and devoted to the gospel of Christ. Both in living it and in sharing it. Through his letters, he never shut down the avenues of dialogue or conversation with any of the churches he held dear.

Keeping the avenues of discussion and conversation open are vital for us in all areas of our lives. In our families, in our communities and in our churches open discussion is necessary to help people know they are heard and understood and valued for their ideas. Of course, to have such discussion or conversation we always need a speaker and a listener. And, we need to realize that the roles need to be switched from time to time to make certain all parties to the discussion know they are being heard and, even more, understood. This requires clarity of thought on the part of the speaker and total focus on the part of the listener. It means that we don't try to push certain hot buttons when it is our turn to explain just where we are in our thought process but that we proceed fairly. It also means that those who listen must truly do so and try to discover things that may be unsaid. Remember, God gave us two ears and one mouth for a reason, that we will listen twice as much as we speak.

Moses had the knack. He would listen to God patiently. And, then, when things did not seem to be in the best interest of him self or the nation Israel he would clearly point out what was amiss. For claiming he was not much of a speaker, he did very well. There was mutual respect between him and his Maker.

Jesus, too, knew how to listen well and understand just what those who questioned him were really asking. He put out a few brushfires with his questioners when they would try to pin him down. They listened for what it was they wanted to hear, however, and never truly understood the message Jesus was trying to bring to all people. Jesus was open to all questions and questioners. He must have had the talent for seeing through the superficial, expressed concerns of people to the heart of the matter. He knew well and understood the restlessness of the human soul and the need it has to be anchored. That is why he always took the time, even for the least of them, to listen and respond.

Throughout our Bible we have wonderful examples of discussions and conversations that advanced people's understanding of one another and of God. We see speakers and listeners working toward solutions to the life problems that threatened to encompass them. We have the opportunity within us and within our relationships to carry on this tradition of listening and learning and growing together. God gave us the gifts of thought and voice and reason for a purpose. We need to use these gifts as did those of old. Amen