



**Sermons from St. Marks
United Church of Christ
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Requiem for a Hero

Text: Deuteronomy 34:1-10

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Rev. Dr. John E. Manzo

One day a man was reading the classified section of the newspaper. The man needed to buy a car when he noticed an ad:

Mercedes Benz--one year old. Perfect condition. \$50.00
Come in person. 53 Main Street.

The man couldn't believe it. He figured it was a misprint. He figured there was a catch. But he went to 53 Main Street anyway.

He examined the car in the driveway. It was perfect. It was gorgeous. He wanted it.

He rang the doorbell and a pleasant woman answered the door. He asked about the car. Was it in good condition? Yes, she told him, it was perfect.

"What about the price?" he asked, "the newspaper said it was going for \$50. There had to be a mistake. What is the real price?"

She said, "The price is \$50.00 cash."

The man paid her \$50.00 and the deal was made. But before he left he was feeling somewhat guilty. "Why," he asked, "You could have received so much more!"

The woman smiled and said, "My husband ran off with his secretary. He told me I could have the house and the property. He told me to sell the car. The only thing he wanted was the money for the car. So, I have sold him the car and I'll give him his precious money."

This story speaks of a variety of issues: Justice--the philandering husband gets what he deserves.

Revenge--the wife gets even.

Grace--the man buying the car, through no work of his own, falls into a wonderful deal.

Though it seems like a simple tale--it's rather complex.

Today we read about the passing of Moses. On one hand Moses is a very simple man. He was called by God to be God's instrument in bringing the people out of Egypt. Moses did his job and that was that. Simple and clear cut.

On the other hand, Moses is a very complicated character. He's a convicted killer who flees into the desert. He is called by God and comes back to plead God's case before the Pharaoh--a man Moses had been raised with.

I've been thinking a great deal about Moses lately and I came to the conclusion that we rarely talk about him. Why?

Well, when we look to see who the Father of the Israelites is, we look at Abraham and say--Ah, he is the father of us all.

When we want to know who the greatest prophet is, we point to Elijah and say, "He is the greatest prophet of them all."

What did Moses do? Moses got the people out of Egypt--a place we don't have to worry about. Moses also gave us the law. And, let's get honest and real--who really likes the law?

So we don't talk much about Moses. But on this day, when we reflect upon the death of this man, I wanted to do something of a requiem for a hero. Reflect on the life of one who had such an impact on Judaism and Christianity.

I want to do this in light of three virtues Moses had.

First of all, Moses knew what his role was. Moses did not free the Israelites--God did. Moses did not do battle with the Pharaoh, God did. Forget Charlton Heston and the 10 Commandments. God was in charge--not Moses. And Moses knew what his role was. Moses was called by God and did what God had called him to do. And people constantly moaned about Moses.

Robert Alper, the Jewish comic and rabbi, tells this story about a synagogue that uses voice mail. Alper phoned and heard this message: "Welcome to Temple Beth Shalom. If you're calling from a touch-tone phone and would like membership information, press one. For our service schedule, press two. To complain to the rabbi, press three. To complain about the rabbi, press four, five or six."

The people in the desert hit four, five, or six on a regular basis. Yet, Moses always knew his place as God's servant.

Moses was always God's humble servant. He knew that when he was in the court of the Pharaoh, it wasn't a battle between he and the Pharaoh, but between God and the wicked king of

the Egyptians. Moses knew that he did bring plagues upon the Egyptians--God did. Moses knew that he did not part the Red Sea--God did. Moses did not lead the people through the desert--God did.

Moses always knew who was in charge.

Secondly, Moses always remained faithful to his people. If you ever study Judaism, you will note that it is different from Christianity. Judaism is based totally upon the community. There is no room for individualism within Judaism. Everyone is part of the same community. There might be differences of opinion, but people are always expected to bend for the sake of the community.

The Jews are a people united by a common bond.

They were also very irritating to Moses. The story of Exodus reminds us of this.

Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt.

Everyone is happy.

However, they find the Egyptians are chasing them.

Everyone is upset.

God and Moses drown the Egyptian army.

Everyone is happy.

The people realize they are free--but they are also stuck in the middle of the desert.

Everyone is upset.

Moses says he is going to the top of Mount Sinai to talk to God.

Everyone is happy.

Moses is gone 40 days.

Everyone is upset.

The people drove Moses crazy--and yet he was always faithful to them.

There's an old story of a war between the birds and the animals. Bat was on the bird's side. In the first battle the birds were badly beaten. As soon as Bat saw that the battle was going against them, he crept away, hid under a log, and stayed there until the fight was over.

When the animals were going home, Bat slipped in among them.

Finally an animal said, "Hey you, Bat--weren't you in the battle against us?"

Bat said, "How can these be. Did you ever see a bird with double teeth! Did you ever see a bird with fur? I am one of you."

The animals said nothing.

Soon, there was another battle. This time the birds won. Again, Bat slipped sides and went home with the birds.

Finally a bird said, "Hey you, Bat--weren't you in the battle against us?"

Bat said, "No, I am one of you. I don't belong to them. Do any animals have birds. I am one of you!"

And the birds said nothing.

The war continued and Bat slipped back and forth back and forth.

Finally the war ended and the birds and the animals held a council--What to do about the bat!!!

At last they said to him, "Hereafter, you will fly around alone at night, and will never have any friends, among neither those that fly nor those that walk!"

Moses was never in this position. No one could ever question his faithfulness to his people.

Finally, Moses always remained faithful to God.

Moses, with the help of his brother Aaron, was always faithful to God. No matter what abuse he took from the people his faith and confidence in the Lord never wavered.

And God did not make it easy for him.

The people were banished to the desert for 40 years. It wasn't Moses' fault--yet everyone blamed him.

The desert was a hot, miserable place--it wasn't Moses' fault--yet everyone blamed him.

Yet Moses always remained faithful to God.

I have often found the ending of the Moses story to be somewhat distressing. Here is this

magnificent individual, faithful to God and the people, and God denies Moses entering the Promised Land.

But maybe not. God shows Moses the Promised Land where people were going; but Moses death leads to something else.

It dawned on me that Moses returns in a Bible story long after this.

In the gospels, Jesus brings Peter, James, and John to the top of a mountain where Jesus is transfigured. While this is taking place, the three apostles see Jesus talking to Elijah, the greatest of all the prophets, and Moses. We realize that Moses did not go to Israel; for Moses the Promised Land was not about Israel, but was with God. God ultimately rewards Moses loyalty to the people and to God.

Moses might not be spoken about much by us, but we do so out of our own weakness. Moses was one of the Bible's greatest heroes. To forget him is to forget a segment of his history; to forget him is to miss one of God's most faithful servants of all time.