

“Golden Age and the Golden Rule”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
October 25, 2020 – Proper 25A/21st Sunday after Pentecost
Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Matthew 22:34-46

Well, as I mentioned in the children’s message, I did go to school in Kansas, but I grew up in a much less flat place. I grew up in Colorado, which has plenty of mountains (although there are lots of flat places there as well). One of the great joys of my life when I was younger was spending time in the mountains and hiking through them.

I remember as a fourth grader my first hike to the top of a 14,000 foot peak, which was done when I was at a church camp. It took about eight hours to make the 14-mile trek to the top and back. It was a wonderful, although very challenging, experience. I learned something very important about mountaineering on that first hike up the big mountain, and that is when you find yourselves above timberline, where there are no trees and there’s not a discernible path before you, you have to find markers that have been left by others to guide you forward. These markers, these cairns, are all over on trails that are above timberline, which in Colorado was about 3,000 vertical feet of this hike, and so it was absolutely essential to follow the cairns to get to the top of the mountain.

We know that we have plenty of mountains in New England as well, many of which are above our tree line and also have rock cairns that lead you to the top of them. In fact, on many of our paths in New England, you can see no pathway at all except for the cairns, and so they’re absolutely essential to keep you moving in the right direction, keep you from getting lost, and keep you from getting into danger.

Today will be considering living cairns: Markers that have gone before us and cairns that live among us that serve as guides for our life's journey. These show us the path that leads to the glorious heights.

Please pray with me: "O God, take our minds and think through them, take our lips and speak through them, and take our hearts and set them on fire" (W.S. Coffin).

Today is Golden Age Sunday. We heard in our reading from the Book of Exodus about golden-aged Moses, who was on a mountaintop at a high point on his life journey at the end of its 120 years. Over the course of his long journey, he experienced many lofty moments and many lowly moments as well. From the very moment of his birth he experienced a lifetime of ups and downs. Consider his birth: He was born to a down-and-out people whose children were being slaughtered by oppressive, more powerful others in the land of Egypt. And his mother put him in a basket and sent him down the Nile River. And then he was raised up: He was lifted out of the river by Pharaoh's daughter and raised in the king's own household, lifted high above the others in Egypt. Well, he went down in life again after he killed an Egyptian for beating a Hebrew slave, spending many years in self-exile in the land of Midian, where he was a lowly shepherd. But then he had this lofty experience of God on a mountaintop, being present, face-to-face, with the creator of all--and you can't get loftier than that! Well, the lofty Creator said, "Go down off the mountain. Go down to Egypt!" And he did just that, but then he led the Israelites up out of Egypt, away from their oppressors. While in the desert, he met with God again in the lofty mountains, and there he received God's lofty law, became the great prophet to the people, and he led the people to where they could see the land that was promised to them. Yes, Moses had an amazing life, full of highs and lows.

And certainly he would have recognized in that moment, standing on the mountaintop at the end of his life, that God brought him through the highs and lows, every step of the way, by being present with him. That's exactly what made his life so blessed. God was present with Moses, and Moses recognized that he was in God's presence. In this, he is an example, Moses is a cairn, one who shows us the path that we ought to follow.

And Moses is not the only hero of our faith, we are blessed, in fact, by many cairns. Next week, we celebrate All Saints Day, when we remember the cairns that have gone before us. Hopefully, will have plenty of saints marching in our sanctuary, or at least a small gathering of them, as for the first time in months, we will gather together in person, and when we do, we will remember the ancestors that we share in our common faith.

But today, we remember some of the cairns that live among us on this Golden Age Sunday. And I'm not saying some of our elders are like rocks, but some of them have lived a while, though maybe not quite as long as our granite mountains. We know that they, like cairns on our granite mountains, point to the way forward, showing us how to serve God and one another. We celebrate today our elders, these living cairns: Fred Baumann, Robert Clark, Robert Dearth, Doris Green, Frank Muccio, Doris Parsons, Albert Savage, Margaret Sorensen, Raymond Sorensen, Eleanor Teschek, Ernest Triplett, Janice Turner, Elsie Wallace, and Richard Wallace. We are grateful to our elders for their faithfulness to this church and for their faithfulness to God. We are blessed to be in their presence, that they are among us. We are blessed to have them as these living cairns, providing examples for us to emulate and being guides for us to follow as they follow the path of our great elder, Jesus Christ.

While we're celebrating elders this day, I mention Jesus as being one of them—in fact, he's chief among them, though it's not really common in our tradition to consider Jesus as an elder. However, in some African Christian traditions, Jesus is understood as our chief elder. Francois Kabasélé, a Catholic priest and professor of theology in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, writes quite a bit about Jesus as our elder, specifically Jesus as our elder brother. In Kabasélé's Bantu culture and in many other cultures of the Bantu peoples of Central Africa, which are patrilineal societies, the eldest brother plays a critical role in the family. The elder brother is the one who receives the most respect and the elder brother receives all the inheritance, but the elder brother also takes full responsibility for the actions of his younger siblings. And so for Bantu peoples, the elder, especially the elder brother, has a big role to play. This is why many of our Christian sisters and brothers in Africa recognize Jesus as the elder brother, the one who is most blessed by God and blesses the younger siblings by taking care of them and being responsible for them.

Recognizing Jesus as the elder brother, as I mentioned, is not common in European Christian traditions. We don't often have Jesus as our brother included in our statements of faith, at least in our ancient ones. This concept also doesn't show up anywhere in one of our more modern ones, but for the United Church of Christ's Statement of Faith, at least as adopted by former president of the UCC, Robert Moss. It reads, "We believe in God, the Eternal Spirit, who has been made known to us and Jesus our brother." Martin Luther also called Jesus our brother in his great hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," which refers to Christ our brother. And he once wrote a sermon with that title as well: "Christ Our Brother." But we don't often recognize this, that Jesus is our elder brother, our older sibling who guides us, the one who shows us the way, the one who takes responsibility for us.

And yet that really is this is what Jesus is for us, an elder that blesses us by guiding the way. He does this through his life and he does this through his teachings. Jesus served as the great cairn by giving us the great commandment: Love the Lord your God with your whole being, and love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus our elder teaches that this is not a new law at all, but really it is the law of Israel. It is the greatest law given to Moses and passed down from generation to generation, and a law that we continue to this day when we follow the marker that Jesus left before us on the mountaintop when we love God and love our neighbors ourselves. This is for us a golden rule: Treat others as you would like to be treated. This is God's law, the greatest of God's laws for us.

Well, the people of Jesus, they needed a cairn guiding them to love the other, for love was not necessarily a guiding principle, although it should have been. At the time when Jesus lived in Palestine, their society was fractured under Roman rule. There was hatred of the other in Palestine of the first century, and there was competition for power between people and groups living there. We know that there were at least 17 different sects vying for power in Judaism in the first century in Palestine. This week we read about a couple of these. One was the Sadducees. These were folks that were in the Temple and emphasized the worship of God only in the temple. They were in competition with the Pharisees. These were people who were in the synagogues saying that these gathering places outside of the temple were more important. Last week, we heard about the Herodians. These were supporters of King Herod, who was a puppet of the Rome. And we've heard about the Essenes. These were desert-dwelling folks. They are the ones who gave us the Dead Sea Scrolls, and they didn't like any outsiders, so they lived in the desert, away from everybody else. We've

also heard of the Zealots. One of Jesus' own disciples was one of these characters. They were a party that wanted to overthrow Rome. In fact, they stirred up rebellions and they were the ones who incited a revolt that ended with the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE. A second century rabbi, Rabbi Ben Torta, said that the Temple in Jerusalem was allowed to be destroyed by God because "hatred dwelled within its walls." First century Palestine was not a harmonious place. As people were competing for power, love for the other was not the way. And so they perfectly failed to please God by following the perfect rule to love God and love others.

Well, this was the golden rule in Jesus time, and it's a golden rule for our time because we are fractured as well. It is better not to gain power over other people by getting your own way at the expense of the other. What is best for us, what is golden really, is to love the other, to give power, to lift up the other.

This, my friends, is what love is. It's about giving, not getting. Love is not about warm fuzzies. Love, rather, is about seeking after the best interests of the other, regardless of what it may bring you, whether gain or loss. Biblical scholar Douglas Hare describes this kind of love as a "stubborn and unwavering commitment" to do good for the other. That's God's kind of love, a stubborn commitment to do good for the other. Friends, that's the way of Christ, that's the way of Moses, that's the way of so many of our spiritual ancestors, and that is the way of the elders that we celebrate on this golden age Sunday. Like Cairns, they guide the way. Their examples of love can lead us to the heights if we follow them. They can lead us to a golden age where the golden rule reigns over us all.

So let us go to this mountaintop together, let us love one another as Christ our elder brother so dearly loves us, and let us love the others

around us. In the immortal words of Lenny Kravitz, “We’ve got to let love rule.” So let’s do just that this day. Let love rule! Amen.