

## “The Drip Line”

Deuteronomy 6: 20-25; Hebrews 11: 8-13, 32-40, 12: 1-3

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Looking back, I realize that I came along in the nick of time. TV was coming on strong but still was in its infancy and was not yet a major portion of everyone's lives. At my grandparent's house, where I spent a great deal of time, the TV might be on only one evening a week: Sunday night to watch Disney's "The Wonderful World of Color" (even though the TV was black and white), "Bonanza," "Gunsmoke," and "Ed Sullivan." Otherwise, the evenings were spent in the den, reading the paper and talking, or around the kitchen table talking. Anytime but winter, every evening we were outside on the porch sitting around the pecan tree, we all called "The Talking Tree" because that's what we did under it, talk. And if we went to see someone, we loaded up in the pickup and talked and when we got to their house, it was to sit around and talk. I came along in the nick of time because before television people still talked and told stories.

My extended family was a family of talkers and story-tellers. To this day, my great-Uncle Mac remains the best story-teller I've ever heard. His stories were not of grand events or dramatic encounters; just everyday happenings at the cotton compress where he worked for 56 straight years without missing one day of work, or in the garden, or family or remembering when he and his younger sister, my grandmother, were growing up. My maternal grandmother and grandfather were pretty good story-tellers, too. It was mainly from them that I heard the stories of their growing up, stories of my great-grandparents, stories of the Dust Bowl, the Depression, farming, "hoboing," hunting and fishing stories, stories of my parents

in their childhood, stories of life during World War II, and stories of Texas and Southern history.

One of my grandmother's older sisters, Aunt Alphie, lived down the alley from her, in a very small, very simple house, with a lush garden, and a good sized chicken yard full of white leghorn chickens. My grandmother and I would walk down the alley to see Aunt Alphie and talk. I remember clearly the time going out to the chicken yard with Alphie and my grandmother to gather eggs. We came upon a chicken snake stuck in the chicken-wire fence because it had swallowed an egg and couldn't get through the mesh. My Aunt Alphie said, "Hah! I got you, you rascal. You won't be eating any more of my eggs." To my amazement to this day, she reached down and grabbed that snake by the tail, popped it like a whip and popped its head off! Suffice it to say that Aunt Alphie was larger than life in my 4 year-old mind.

All four of my grandparents lived in my small hometown, as well as, numerous aunts and uncles, cousins, second cousins, and so on from both sides of the family. My dad's parents lived right next door. I remember the time when my cousin and I, both of us about five or six, played gas-station with my paternal grandfather's pickup by filling his gas tank with gravel. We didn't do that but once.

1956, the year I was born, I had two uncles, one from each side of the family, who were all-state on the state champion high school football team. When I started school in 1963 I learned quickly that the teachers knew who I was, and knew and had taught both of my parents and my cousins and uncles. And although I had star athlete uncles, if I wanted to be on my teachers' good side, I had better emulate my mother and father in the classroom.

When we went to church I was surrounded by many of these relatives and family members, all these school teachers, and a whole network of people who knew me by name and knew to whom I belonged. One time, my four year-old brother decided that he wanted to go home from my grandparents' house and just started walking. He got about four blocks, pausing at the highway he had to cross, and Eddie Taylor, the man who owned a little service station/grocery store there on the highway, saw him, persuaded him with an Orange soda pop to come into the station, where he promptly called my grandmother, "Bun, I've got your youngest grandson down here. He says he was going home; I got him just before he crossed the highway." Eddie Taylor knew who we were and to whom we belonged.

Once we were all sitting under that big old pecan tree that we called the "talking tree" and it began to rain – a gentle but steady rain. After awhile, I noticed how we remained dry within the clearly defined circle under the canopy of that tree. The edge of the circle was marked by the water dripping from the limbs and leaves of the tree. My dad explained that what I was seeing was called the "drip line." The drip line roughly corresponded with the under-ground root system of the tree so that the tree could receive its nourishment.

Now, I know that the root system of trees is more complex than my story, but for our purposes this morning, go with me on this. What I learned as a boy is that though from time to time the root system of a tree might extend its reach beyond the drip line, for a tree to grow properly, for it to be well-nourished; its root system shouldn't reach beyond its drip line. A healthy tree knows its limits of nourishment. It knows its drip line (see Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *The Wisdom of Stability: Rooting Faith in a Mobile Culture*, p. 84-85, for inspiration of this analogy).

I grew up with a well-defined drip line. My root system was well nourished and fed by my extended family and friends and neighbors, teachers and more. These people were my drip line.

Yet like many people, especially young people, I often chafed at the limits of my drip line. I wanted to go beyond it. I saw the drip line as parochial and provincial and even backward; there was injustice, and to be honest, there was more than a little pain and hurt in my drip line. And I wanted to accomplish something big, make a difference in the world. And as I grew and matured, I began to want to accomplish something big for God. Doing little things in a little town full of provincial people, where some of my memories were painful, was not what I wanted.

Nevertheless, we all have a history, which for better or worse has formed us and fed us. We cannot ignore or forget our past. My old teacher, Fred Craddock, used to say, "If we can remember only as far back as our own birth, then we are orphans." And Wendell Berry says, "The past is our definition" (*Standing by Words*, p. 14).

The African-American womanist writer Alice Walker said, "To acknowledge our ancestors means we are aware that we did not make ourselves, that the line stretches all the way back, perhaps to God; or to gods. We remember them because it is an easy thing to forget; that we are not the first to suffer, rebel, fight, love, and die. The grace with which we embrace life, in spite of the pain, the sorrows, is always a measure of what has gone before." (from *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems*)

A biblical understanding is that faith, at its core, is memory. We learn who God is, who and where we are, by remembering and telling stories of our ancestors and how God worked in times past.

In the passage from Deuteronomy that we read this morning, the writer says that when our children come to us and ask us, “Why do we have to do all these religious things?” Our answer to them is not a bullet list or a power-point presentation; not some abstraction. We tell them a story. We tell them the story of being slaves in Egypt and how we cried out to God, and how God heard our cries and sent Moses to deliver us, and lead us out of bondage to a new life in a land of promise.

Our New Testament reading is from the famous chapter in Hebrews called “the roll call of the faithful.” The church was confused about who she was and not sure what the future looked like, so the writer reminds the church of its identity by telling stories of its ancestors. More importantly, these stories told the church of God’s identity. And their faith, as they moved into an unknown and scary future, was nourished by these stories of their past.

The surest way to trust God into the future is to tell and retell and remember how God has worked in the past. This same God who led Abraham and Sarah, Moses and the children of Israel, is the same God who will lead us. The same God who called the Apostle Paul in the first century, who used Augustine in the fifth century, who spoke to and through Dame Julian of Norwich in the fourteenth and the Anabaptists in the sixteenth. Who inspired us through the poetry of John Donne, George Herbert, and John Milton in the seventeenth, and helped set people free through Sojourner Truth in the nineteenth and Martin Luther King in the

twentieth – is the same God who speaks and leads us today and will lead us tomorrow.

The same God who led Jack and Florence, Archie and Judy and Chris, and others to start this church in 1968 is the same God with us in the present and who will lead us in the future.

These stories tell us who we are, where we are, and where we're going. They tell us who God is and what it means to follow the God we know through Jesus Christ.

These stories tell us of our drip line in Christ.

Now, I know that some of us have better pasts than others of us. But for all of us, these stories of Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Paul, Julian of Norwich and all the rest – these stories of faith give us a new family of faith. No matter who you are; no matter where you come from or who your people are, you have a new extended family stretching around the globe and through time that tells you who God is, who you are, and nourishes you.

Look around this room – this is your drip line. And like any drip line, it gives us nourishment and tells us of our limits. And like any drip line there's a lot of forgiving and seeking forgiveness for it to work.

And I love this part. When we become part of God's Story in Jesus Christ, and embrace all these extraordinary family members, we are freed up to embrace and redeem all our other family stories.

Over the years, especially in my come-next-month 22 years here with you, I've learned the wisdom of what old Carlyle Marney used to say, "We have to learn to bless our roots." In other words, sooner or later, we have to come to terms

with our past, our drip line, make peace with it, and learn to thank God for it. It doesn't mean we embrace all of it or even agree with it all, but it does mean that we learn to give thanks to God for the nourishment we received. Most likely, if you're like me, we need to do a lot of forgiving and, if you're like me, we need to ask for even more forgiveness.

I'm convinced that unless we forgive and seek forgiveness, unless we reconcile and give thanks and bless our past, then we'll not fully receive the nourishment, the strength, the nutrition that our old drip line has provided. Furthermore, I'm not sure we'll learn to grow and be open to the nourishment that God's new drip line has for us. In other words, we'll always be stunted in our growth.

But take courage, we remember the stories of our ancestors who forgave and sought forgiveness. We don't have to invent the wheel. We can learn and be inspired and encouraged by those who have gone before us.

Scott Momaday is a Native American writer. More specifically, he is a Kiowa who grew up near Lawton, Oklahoma. He remembers as a boy, listening to his grandmother tell the stories of their ancestors. She told him the story of the Kiowa people, how they were a poor and primitive people living on the edge of the Rocky Mountains until the coming of the horse. With the horse, they moved into the Central and Southern Plains and became a great and powerful people, masters of the horse, and among the Lords of the Plains.

One night, close to bedtime, he needed to ask his grandmother something so he went up to her room. The door was partially open and he could see that the only light was a candle. His grandmother had knelt beside the bed, her beautiful, long, coal black hair was down and had been combed. He stood there and watched with

baited breath while she held her hands up in the air and began to chant in that ancient Kiowa language. He was spellbound.

When she finished, Momaday quietly crept away, never saying a word to her. He later wrote that that night, when he walked away from his grandmother's room, he knew who he was. He knew he was a Kiowa.

When I was a boy, and I walked away from that Talking Tree, I knew who I was.

The question is: when you leave here on Sunday mornings, do you know you're a Christian?

Amen and amen.