

Investing in the next generation

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[0:00] Lord, thank you. Thank you that you are present here with us. Would you fill us with your spirit? Would you speak to us this morning? Thank you for the joy of worshiping together. We pray these things in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Amen. We've been in a series this fall talking about Advent's mission and vision, and this week we're going to be talking about investing in the next generation.

So as we get started this morning, I want you to just think about if there has been someone in your life that has invested in you, that has had a really big impact on you, what was it about that person that changed your life?

Well, for me, it's my spiritual director, B.E. Palmer. B.E.'s been an Anglican priest for 50 years. He was my priest in high school, and he's been a spiritual father to me.

We talk about everything. We talk about parenting. We talk about pastoring, theology, everything. But the reason that B.E. has changed my life is that he just oozes the love of Jesus.

[1:11] And Mary Oliver says it this way, poet Mary Oliver, I know a man of such mildness and kindness, it is trying to change my life. He does not preach or teach, but simply is.

It is astonishing, for he is Christ's ambassador, truly, by rule and act. But more, he is kind with the sort of kindness that shines out, but is resolute, not fooled. He has eaten the dark hours, and could also, I think, soldier for God, riding out under the storm clouds, against the world's pride and unkindness, with both unassailable sweetness and tempering word.

This is why B.E.'s presence is so powerful. And I hope that you have had or do have somebody like this in your life. So that leads us to the question before us this morning.

How do we become people like this? How do we become people that invest in others because of who we are at our core? And this reading in Deuteronomy shows us the way.

Let's talk a little bit about Deuteronomy. This is Moses' farewell address to Israel. He knows he's about to die. But before he does, he renews the law, the commandments that God had given the Israelites after leaving Egypt.

[2:42] So why does he feel like he needs to retread this ground? Well, partially because the Israelites had been in the wilderness for 40 years. So there was a whole generation of people that were not in Egypt.

So Moses wants them to know the story, right? But moreover, people are forgetful, right? If you know the story of the Israelites at all, you know that even the Israelites who had been in Egypt pretty quickly started complaining and forgot what the Lord had done for them.

So pausing to remember is important. And we remember as Anglicans in our weekly worship, this is why every week our liturgy takes us through the story of creation, our fall into sin, Jesus' redemption, and our hope for heaven.

And this shows us something really important. It shows us that sometimes in order to move forward, we have to look back, right? We have to remember. So this portion in Deuteronomy that Evelyn read serves as reminder, as instruction, and as warning.

It comes right after Moses has restated the Ten Commandments for the Israelites. And now he's offering them a single-point summary. He's saying, if you get this right, everything else will fall into place.

[4:00] In the first part of this passage, verses 4 through 9, function as the Shema. This is the Israelite confession of faith.

Shema is the Hebrew word for hear. Hear, O Israel. Now religious Jews still say the Shema three times a day. It's said at every synagogue service. It's the first prayer Jewish children learn.

It would have been the first prayer that Jesus learned as a child. And a lot of times it's combined with other scriptures or prayers. The way Jesus pairs it with the command from Leviticus to love your neighbor as yourself.

You heard it at the beginning of our service this morning, right? And there's a reason it's placed there. Because Jesus says it's the first and greatest commandment. Why is that?

Why would this have been so foundational to the faith of the Israelites, to our faith? Well, verse 4 reminds us of who God is.

[5:02] Hear, O Israel. The Lord our God, the Lord is one. So first of all, hear doesn't mean to just sort of like sound just kind of washing over you.

Hear means to proactively listen, to try to understand, to seek to obey. Today, when my son Peter was little, I used to, when I really needed him to hear me and listen to something, I would take his little face in my hands and I'd say, look at my eyes.

I feel like that's what Moses is doing here. He's saying, listen, look at me. This is important, you know? And the Lord is one. In the ancient Near East, the surrounding cultures were polytheistic. They worshiped lots of gods. And often these gods were anthropomorphic constructions with human characteristics. They were gods that people had made in their own image.

So Yahweh's different, right? The Lord is one. He's not just the supreme ruler among many. But everything that he is, he is completely.

[6:06] So he's all-powerful. He's all-loving. He's good. He's faithful. He's just. He's kind. I could go on and on. And the Israelites needed to remember this, that Yahweh was completely different from any other ruler or god that they had ever experienced.

So what about you? Do you struggle not to construct God in your own image? I do. Maybe you think of God as sort of detached, like, oh, you know, just do what you want as long as no one gets hurt. Or maybe you think God is cruel because you look at the world around you or you think even about your own life and things that have happened to you and you think, I don't want this God.

Or maybe you hear God's voice in your head, kind of like a disappointed parent. Oh, you messed up again. When are you going to get it right? And I get this, y'all.

If any of this is, if any of these are you or something I didn't name, we all struggle with this. But what if the key to actually knowing God comes in the next verse?

[7:20] Because following this proclamation of who God is, we get invited into something, into love, into a relationship.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. And this kind of powerful love only comes with a relationship.

And in the ancient Near East, rulers did sometimes command love from their subjects, but it certainly wasn't relational. And the gods in the surrounding Israelite cultures weren't asking for love or a relationship.

So again, Yahweh, the one God, is utterly unique in this way. And so why does this matter as we think about investing in the next generation?

Well, it matters because recognition of God's love for us and being rooted in that love and loving him in return, this is how we make sense of our lives. The foundation for everything.

[8:28] So let me come back to that question of God's character. Would a cruel or detached or critical God want a relationship with you? I don't think so.

I don't think so. And if we aren't rooted in the truth of this love, if we're not standing on that as a community, then we don't have anything to pass on. Paul writes, I pray that you being rooted and established in love, right?

It's a starting place. And this is why Jesus named it. It's the first and greatest commandment.

Because when the reality of God's power and goodness permeate every aspect of our being, we fall to our knees in worship and in recognition of our own smallness and need for mercy.

And it is from this posture, from our knees, with the one God's powerful love being rooted in that, that we can love and invest in the next generation.

So how do we stay rooted in this love? Verse 6, These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts.

[9:40] And we've seen this word heart a few times in this passage. I think it's worth stating here that a lot of times when we think about saying, I love somebody with all my heart, we're thinking about our emotions, right?

We're talking about a feeling. But for the Israelites, this Hebrew word *levav* was broader than that. It meant understanding. It meant consciousness, moral framework, inner life, the core of your being, the seat of our wills.

And so we're meant to carry these commands in the center of our being so that they can influence everything that we do. So let's ask another question.

Let's just think about this together. If God's commandments aren't on our hearts, what is? So like Pastor Thomas said last week, we're made to reflect something, aren't we?

We're made to worship something. We're designed as worshipers, made in the image of God to worship him. So if he's not there, then what is? Is it the surrounding culture?

[10:46] Other people's opinions of us? Striving for success? It could be a person, a situation.

But all of that is impermanent, right? And is that the kind of legacy that we want to invest in future generations? It won't last.

But even if we do want to reflect God, even if we do want these commandments to be on our hearts, it can feel kind of abstract. What does that mean? But Moses shows us in the next verses, he says, impress them on your children.

Talk about them. When you sit at home, when you walk along the road, when you lie down, when you rise up, tie them as symbols on your heads and bind them on your foreheads.

Write them on the door frames of your houses and on your gates. So in other words, to bear God's commandments on our hearts means to be saturated in them.

[11:51] It means to weave them into the fabric of our daily lives, of our being. You could update this to say, talk about these around your dinner table, at your kid's soccer game, on the metro, at your work happy hour, with your running buddy, as you leave for work, as you get home.

And the list goes on. Let it permeate every aspect of our lives. And I think Christianity in the West tends to be very focused on a personal relationship with God, right?

And to be clear, praying and studying Scripture individually, that is not a bad thing. I don't want anybody to hear this and say, like, Hillary said I didn't have to read my Bible and, like, tell Tommy. Like, no, Hillary did not say that, okay?

That's not what I'm saying. We encourage and affirm that at Church of the Advent. But in Scripture and throughout most of church history, we see communities of worshipers studying the Scriptures together, praying together, seeking to be formed together, young and old, single and married from all backgrounds and all walks of life.

This address that Moses is giving, this giving of the law, he's giving it to the whole community, young and old. And even when we pray, even if we're in a room by ourselves, praying and studying Scripture, the Holy Spirit is present with us, binding us to believers throughout time and space and to one another, even when we're not physically present together.

[13:21] And this is why we prioritize our weekly Eucharist service. It's the most important thing we do in our church because it's an opportunity for all of us to come together from the smallest to the biggest.

And we feast at the Lord's table. We remember his incredible generosity and love for us. And we join in worship with saints and angels and all the company of heaven.

And friends, this exhortation to be saturated in the life of the Lord, for every aspect of our lives to be focused on him, this is the place that allows us to then invest in the next generation.

We had a healing prayer seminar last week with Kathleen Christopher of Christian Healing Institute. And she gave this image of a sponge. She said when a sponge is saturated, it can't hold any more water.

It just starts to drip out everywhere. And that's us. When we are saturated with the life of God, with the Holy Spirit, then it just drips out in the best possible way onto everyone around us.

[14:29] So just by simply being together, we lead one another deeper into this rooted life of God. Now as we talk about this, a few things could be coming up for you.

When you think about this idea of investing in the next generation, you might be thinking, well, I don't have younger people in my life. I don't have biological children.

It might be a point of pain for you. I hear that. But I do want to encourage you with a few things. First of all, Jesus redefines family.

The reading that Evelyn read from Ephesians, Paul says, For this reason, I kneel before the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name.

So when we become part of God's family, the moment we get baptized, we have a new identity as God's child. So think about what I said a minute ago.

[15 : 32] The church is a community of worshipers. The people sitting around you, look around. If you're a baptized follower of Jesus, this is your family. And because of that, we're all responsible for raising the next generation up in the faith, for encouraging one another in our lives in Christ.

In fact, we promise to do this every time we have a baptism. We all need spiritual mothers and fathers. Recently, Fuller Theological Seminary did a study that found that children are much more likely to keep their faith into adulthood if they have at least five other adults than their parents pouring into them.

They call this sticky faith, and they have a lot of resources along with this. And this could look like formal volunteering with family ministries. That's great.

We would love that. It could also be something as simple as just being intentional about who we spend time with. Like I said, just being together. So try to spend time with people who are of different ages and stages of life than you are.

Y'all, we need to be a church who starts just inviting ourselves over. You know what I mean? Just come over, or I'm going to come over to your house, and we're just going to hang out. It doesn't have to be anything special.

[16 : 51] It's okay, even if it feels awkward. Let's start doing it. And we're trying to create more spaces as a church to do these kinds of things together, like the swing dance a few weeks ago, cookouts after church, opportunities to serve in ministries like music and welcome team.

Having Evelyn read this morning. I needed to hear that from her. You know? It matters. The word comes from a child just like an adult. So it may be something formal, like a church ministry, but it could also be something like I experienced with my spiritual director, B.E.

Just simple interactions that communicate God loves you. You matter to him. And you matter to me. And here's the other thing to remember.

Whatever our age is, all who have put their trust in Jesus belong to God, and we are his children. We don't need to complicate things.

In fact, in our gospel reading this morning, Jesus said, We need to become like children to enter the kingdom of heaven. So clear that Jesus loves children so much.

[18 : 03] I love this quote by author G.K. Chesterton. Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged.

They always say, do it again. And the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. Some of you guys might have experienced this. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony.

But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike. It may be that God makes every daisy separately.

But he has never gotten tired of making them. It may be that he has the eternal appetite of infancy. For we have sinned and grown old, and our heavenly Father is younger than we.

We have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we. Guys, we have so much to learn about the heart of God from time spent with children, about what it means to trust and to follow him.

[19 : 12] And that's why this word investing in the next generation matters. When you think about investing, you know you're going to get something in return. Well, here's the thing about God's kingdom.

Whatever, even the smallest amount that we invest, we just get an absolute windfall back from the Lord, because that is who he is. It's so much more than we can ask or think or imagine.

Now, the other thing people sometimes say is, when I think about investing in the next generation, well, I don't want to impose my beliefs or certain beliefs on kids. They should be free to choose their own religion, their own way of worshiping.

And y'all, with all due respect, that is a woefully naive way of thinking, because the reality is that we're all being formed every moment of every day.

We all worship something. Remember what I was saying earlier? If God's commandments aren't on our hearts, what is? If we step out of the places of influence that God has called us into, because we're afraid of, like, stepping on somebody's toes, or, like, they don't have freedom, then we can be assured that some other influencer, and I mean influencer in, like, literally the worst sense of the

word, will fill that void.

[20:28] And even with our best efforts, we can be a forgetful people. We all need remembering. That brings us back to where we started. When the Lord your God brings you into the land, he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give you a land with large, flourishing cities that you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant, then when you eat and are satisfied, be careful that you do not forget the Lord who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

Beloved, remember, everything we have has been given to us. As we sit in this beautiful building, we fill it with the praise of God and worship.

Remember that it all belongs to the Lord. It doesn't belong to us. And even more importantly, we belong to him. And that's what we can pass on to the next generation.

So there's just two things to think about this week by way of application. One has to do with responding, and the other with remembering. So first, responding.

Spend time with people who are a different age than you. That's it. If you have to invite yourself over, that's okay. And Pastor Thomas will be preaching about hospitality in a few weeks, but let's get started early, okay?

[22:07] Your house can be a mess. You can be frazzled. You can have peanut butter and jelly for dinner. It's fine. Because you're just being together, right? I love peanut butter and jelly if somebody wants to invite me over.

I like the grape jelly with Wonder Bread. But then secondly, remembering. Write your life story and share it with someone or with a group of people.

This fall, our women's ministry has been having lunches, where at each lunch, a woman from the church shares her story. We've done this twice now, and it has been so incredibly powerful both times.

And on Friday, Ellen Owen shared. And all throughout her story, and the hard things, and the things where she was rejoicing, she was like, God was so kind.

God was so kind here and here and here. And she and I were talking afterwards, and she mentioned that just preparing this story reminded her of God's goodness and faithfulness all over again.

[23:11] And I think I speak for everyone there that we all related to different parts of Ellen's story and how God has worked in her. And y'all, that's because he's the one writing all of our stories.

And so let's find more ways to do this with each other. Tell each other our stories, because it leads us to the great story of who God is and what he's done for us.

And if you're sitting out here this morning and you're not following Jesus, I'm so glad you're here. You're here. Well, how did you get here this morning?

What led to you coming and being part of this worship service? Could it be possible that the Lord Jesus is drawing you? And would you be willing to think back through your life in this light?

To think about where God might have been drawing me, how he might have used these things. I'd love to talk to any of y'all about this, any of your stories.

[24:16] And then as we spend time together, as we look back and remember, let's also consider how God is calling us forward as a community to invest in the generations to come.

So that in Paul's words, we all, being rooted and established in love, may have power together with all the Lord's holy people to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.

And to know this love that surpasses knowledge, that we all may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Lord, thank you that you are able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to your power that is at work within us.

We glorify you, and we worship you, and we praise you for this generation and for all the generations to come. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen. Amen. Amen.