

# **Drinking From Wells We Did Not Dig**

Deuteronomy 6:4-12

September 11, 2011

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

When the Lord your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you – a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, [wells you did not dig], vineyards and olive trees that you did not plant – and when you have eaten your fill, take care that you did not forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

+++

When I was a kid growing up in North Carolina, my sister and I would spend two weeks a summer at Camp Grier – just at the foot of the Appalachian Mountains.

Camp Grier was one of those camps that would be described as “rustic” in today’s terms. There weren’t climbing walls, or high ropes courses, or waterski boats, or any of that fancy stuff. We spent two weeks in the summers going old school: hiking, playing capture the flag, canoeing on the lake, going on scavenger hunts.

After the August we just had, I know it is hard for Louisiana folks to believe that it gets hot anywhere else besides here, but, indeed, with all that running around outside – it was quite warm in the mountains of North Carolina.

In the middle of the camp was a field where we played most of our games, and in the middle of the field was a stone artesian well that gave us access to the coldest, most refreshing water you could ever hope to taste. It was one of these wells that had obviously been around for a while. The stones had moss growing on them. The well had a little bit of a tilt – a combination of the ground settling over time and the many years of withstanding children who leaned against the well to take a long drink. Every day that cold, cold water bubbled up out of the ground...offering refreshment and rest to each young disciple who spent their summers at Camp Grier.

I have no idea who dug that well. There wasn’t a plaque on it indicating that it had been given in honor or memory of one of the saints. Clearly, however, at some point in the past, *someone* found the water source, bore the hole, laid the pipe, stacked up the stones, mixed the mortar. Someone – or some church – paid the money to make that happen. And that someone or some church did so because they wanted to provide an outdoor place for retreat and recreation and ministry for children who would come to that Presbyterian camp. That someone or some church built the well as an expression of their faith in the God who claimed them as God’s own people.

+++

If you are visiting us today, we are glad you are here. If this is your first time visiting our church, you may not know that some things have changed over the past couple of years.

And when I say “some things,” I mean: the schedule for our Sunday morning worship and Sunday school, the building we are in, our staff, the way we communicate with one another, the format of the bulletin, an increasing commitment to engage in ministry with our neighborhood, where you can find a place to park, where you can find a bathroom, which mission partnerships we have developed, how we do ministry with children and families, how we view the Day School as an extension of our ministry to children...you know, little changes like that.

If you are visiting us today, I want you to know that a big part of why we have made these changes is because of you. We have been busy digging new wells from which you can drink because, as a congregation, we want to be welcoming to you – and to others in our city who are hungry to connect to God and a community of faith.

But I also want you to know about what has not changed, and that is this: our identity as a congregation is shaped by knowing that we (and you) are claimed by God’s grace in Jesus Christ and that everything we do as a congregation is done in joyful response to this good news.

What has not changed is that – every year, on this first Sunday after Labor Day – we jump back into a new program year: where we plumb the depths of who God is through adult Sunday school, and where we pass on the stories of our faith to our children; where we come together in fellowship groups, and book clubs, and prayer breakfasts, and Faith on Tap gatherings to build our relationship as members of the family of faith; where we roll up our sleeves and strap on our boots to stuff bags of food at the food pantry, walk a few miles to raise money for the hungry at the Crop Walk, and build toys for children in time for Christmas.

What has not changed is that the most important thing we do is gather together for worship.

What has not changed is that we care for one another when we are in need of caring.

What has not changed is that we watch for where God calls us to engage with people and issues in our city and in our world.

As a church, we've been doing these things for a long time. 166 years, to be exact. A lot has changed in that time – but not the fundamental truth that we exist to glorify God and enjoy him forever. A lot will continue to change over time – but not the fact that the One who we serve and call Lord commissioned us to make disciples, teach the good news, and trust that God would be with us every step of the way.

+++

What I read a few minutes ago is what Jesus called it the greatest commandment: To love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. He added to that great commandment that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves.

*To love the Lord **your** God.*

Because there can be no question that God has claimed us, and there can be no question that God loves us.

*With all your heart, soul, and might.*

Because our commitment to God is total and complete; not isolated to the parts of our lives that are convenient to give over to God.

*To love your neighbor as yourself.*

Because a love for God requires that we love the things and people that God created, and loves, and redeems, and sustains.

To love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and might...and to love your neighbor as yourself. As God's chosen people, treasured and called, this is what we are to remember. It is our history. It grounds us. It reminds us of whence we came. Of whose we are.

So that as we step into the future – a future that is both beautiful and uncertain – this is also what should orient us moving forward.

To love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and might...and to love your neighbor as yourself.

Each of us drink from wells we did not dig. Each of us eat of vineyards we did not plant. Each of us benefit from the faithful work, and commitment, and sacrifice of those who have come before us. So thanks be for those who

have provided for us because of their faithful commitment to love God with heart, soul, and might.

+++

Last week I heard from one of you about a man who grew up in this church, but moved away and has been absent from any church for a long time. I'll call the man Robert. During Robert's absence, he grew disillusioned with the way he heard church-folks talking about God...in ways that made it seem that the grace God offers in Jesus Christ was conditional, and only for those who were good enough, or pure enough, or righteous enough to deserve it.

Over supper last week, Robert voiced his frustration with one of our members who grew up going to the same Sunday school classes and youth group meetings with him when they were kids. This member said to his friend, "Robert, I think they are missing the point. Grace isn't conditional. Grace is a gift. It is free. You have it. That is why it is good news."

Somewhere, deep within Robert's mind, an old well from which he used to drink bubbled up with living water and he recognized anew the amazing gift of grace that had been taught to him in this church as a young man. And now, because of that conversation, Robert's faith has been awakened.

+++

Friends, today is the start of something new. A new program year. A move into the new part of our building. A new opportunity to experience God's grace.

There will always be new things. And in the experience of them, we should be mindful and grateful of those whose shoulders we stand upon as we chart a course onward.

So, onward we go.

I would encourage you drink deeply from the wells that have been dug. Eat freely of the vineyards that have been planted. They are legacies of a past intended to lead us into a hopeful future.

A future that is not to be feared; but to be embraced and enjoyed.

**Prayer: God of our mothers and fathers. God our help in ages past. God our hope for years to come...You alone are our Lord. So help us to orient our whole lives around you; with all of our heart, all of our soul, all of our might. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.**