



# THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – June 15, 2008

God's Valedictory

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## **Deuteronomy 30:11-20**

*11 Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. 12 It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" 13 Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" 14 No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe. 15 See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. 16 If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. 17 But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, 18 I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. 19 I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.*

## **John 14:23-27**

*23 Jesus answered him: "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. 24 Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me. 25 I have said these things to you while I am still with you. 26 But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. 27 Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."*

Imagine a scene with me. We are seated at a graduation ceremony, eagerly waiting for the class to be called to its feet for the presentation of diplomas. Suddenly the last speaker returns to her chair, the conductor taps his baton against his music stand and the opening stanzas of "Pomp and Circumstance" swell up from the orchestra.

We strain for a glimpse of our loved one through the sea of academic garb. As the seniors file across the stage and we spot our graduate, a shiver of emotion runs through us. We are awash in some combination of joy and pride and relief at what our child, our grandchild, our niece has accomplished, together with some dream, some hope, some aspiration for what guidance they will take with them as they venture out into the world. What is that hope? What guidance, what learning do we most fervently pray our loved ones will carry with them into the world? Or, to put the question another way, if God were to give the valedictory address at the graduation, what guidance would you want God to supply?

Perhaps your first thought is to ask God to guide the graduates on the acumen, skills, and character necessary to make their way in the world, to succeed at fulfilling their professional and personal responsibilities. Yes, advice on acumen, skills, and character would increase their prospects for success and make an excellent valedictory address.

But, as you reflect on the question some more, you realize that, actually, you hope for more than professional success and integrity for your child. You do want your child to be successful and responsible, but you also want him or her to be happy. So you ask God to touch on wisdom as well. For, if our children face life with acumen, skills, character, *and* wisdom, they may well organize the circumstances of their lives to maximize their prospects for happiness. Yes, advice on managing the circumstances of their lives would increase their prospects for happiness and make an excellent valedictory.

And we might stop there, content that our graduates were well prepared for life. We might stop there unless we thought about all the circumstances of life that will be beyond our child's control. Unless we reflect that, sooner or later, every life must face adverse circumstances. And now we realize that the greatest gift, the very greatest valedictory God could possibly give our graduate would be guidance on experiencing joy and resilience no matter what external circumstances of life arise. And now you realize you are asking about more than just secular skills and attributes, you are asking about the most precious of spiritual gifts: faith, hope, and love.

The end of Deuteronomy tells a 3000 year old story of Moses leading the weary tribes of Israel to the very end of their 40-year struggle in the wilderness. They stand on the border of Canaan, but God has decreed that Moses may not cross over the Jordan with his people. With his death at hand, Moses summons all of Israel before him to share his last words.

This was no ordinary valedictory, for Moses and his generation had been bound to God's covenant by their direct experience of God's shaking power and presence at Sinai. Now, Moses must charge all successive generations with the essence and revelation of that experience. Israel's ability to hold fast to God, to survive as a nation, to enjoy God's promised gifts in Canaan hangs in the balance.

Moses begins by reminding the people of the wonders God had worked on their behalf, and he then proceeds with one of the most powerful speeches in all of Scripture. It was our Old Testament lesson this morning from Deuteronomy. The essence of Moses' valedictory? Trust and hope in God, love of God, walking in God's ways of love.

Almost 1300 years after the death of Moses, we find Jesus at the Last Supper addressing *his* followers for the last time before his death. The scene portrayed in John's Gospel is, in every real sense, a graduation scene. Jesus has spent three years teaching, living, and traveling with his small band. Now, with his death approaching, Jesus prepares them to go out into the world to continue his ministry, offering

them the ultimate promises and demands of a Christian life. It was our New Testament lesson this morning from John's Gospel. The essence of Jesus' valedictory? Trust and hope in God, love of God, walking in God's ways of love.

What would God say in a valedictory speech to our children? What would God advise to shore up joy and resilience in good times and bad? Actually we know, for God gave valedictory speeches through Moses and Jesus: and God spoke of faith, hope, and love.

How shall our children get through the difficult circumstances life will surely throw their way? By trusting God's provision, by trusting God's love. By trusting that God will be there for them to see them through. As God says in Psalm 91, "*Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name. When they call to me, I will answer them. I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them. With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation*" (Psalm 91:14-16).

Rabbi Abraham Twerski recounts a conversation with a woman who had recovered from the ravages of alcoholism. She told him, "I am a rabid football fan. The New York Jets are my team, and I will never miss a game. One weekend, I had to be away, and I asked a friend to record the game on her VCR. When I returned, she gave me the tape and said, 'By the way, the Jets won.'

"I began watching the game and I was horrified by the Jets' terrible performance. At half time, they were 20 points behind. Under other circumstances, I would have been a nervous wreck, anxious, pacing, and hitting the refrigerator for comfort food to settle my nerves. But this time I was perfectly calm, because I knew the outcome; the Jets were going to win.

"When I entered AA, I made a conscious decision to turn my life over to the will of God. I know that it will turn out all right, because God is in charge of my life. Sometimes, I am 20 points behind at half-time, but I don't panic. I know that I am ultimately going to win."<sup>1</sup>

So now let us shift the scene back to our child's graduation ceremony. Our son takes his diploma and brandishes it in the air, smiling out at us proudly as he trots down the risers. And, unless you are at a very,

very unusual graduation ceremony, God has not actually shown up to make the valedictory address. So the question flashes through our mind. Has our child received God's valedictory guidance? Has he learned the importance of trust and hope in God, love of God, walking in God's ways of love?

You tally up the church school days, the youth ministry evenings, the prayers and stories at home – all the ways you can imagine God teaching God's lessons to our children. You tally up all the occasions where your child has learned the spiritual lessons that God is there for us and love is essential. But before you strike a final sum, before you finish your calculation, just this day, just this Father's Day, I want to remind you of one of God's greatest messengers of trust and hope and love. I want to remind you of a little demonstration project God blesses into most of our lives. I want to be sure you add lessons from our fathers to your tally sheet.

Now, I don't need to preach a Father's Day message on the difference between our heavenly father and our human fathers. Surely we know that not every human father is capable of modeling trustworthiness and love, and no father can carry the project perfectly and all of the time, but most of us can recall precious lessons of trust and love from our fathers. Most of us can remember human lessons that point us by analogy to the trust and love of God.

Let me begin with an illustration of trust. After Tim Russert published his best selling book about his dad, *Big Russ and Me*, the letters started flooding in – 60,000 of them. His book had opened a floodgate for folks wanting to tell stories about their fathers. In his second book, *Wisdom of our Fathers*, Russert said he undertook to read every single letter. He wrote: "What we remember about our fathers has little or nothing to do with material objects. . . . We remember the time they gave us – whether indirectly (though hard work) or in more conventional ways – time spent providing advice, telling a bedtime story, or simply showing up for a recital, a spelling bee, or an athletic event. There's a reason there's a chapter in there called 'Being There.'"2

At their best, our fathers were simply there for us, demonstrating trustworthiness on a human scale. My

dad was there so much for me and my brothers that we sometimes recoiled. My brother Craig actually announced a rule that Dad had to stop coming to every single track meet. The rule didn't work of course. There at the last turn of the track were a couple of stubby pine trees. Every time Craig raced for the finish line, a pair of legs behind the pine trees began jumping up and down. There for us. Always.

Let me conclude with an old illustration of love.

It didn't get any better than this. A hot summer day. No school. Playing stickball against my kid brother in the Pitney Bowes parking lot next to our apartment building. My beloved Giants beating the pants off of his miserable Red Sox in our imaginary World Series. My "Juan Marichal" pitching to his "Frank Malzone" when suddenly a rock came whizzing across my shoulder. I wheeled around to see my nemesis, the red-haired, freckle-faced Guy Cruikshank chucking rocks at us and blocking our only escape route to Mamaroneck Avenue.

We dodged around the corner of the office building to grab some ammo of our own, and I jumped out from cover to launch a rock at the approaching Cruikshank. The rock sailed wide to the right and carried straight smack against the side window of a passing car. Brakes screeched, Cruikshank fled, and before I knew it the driver had thrown me into the passenger seat for a drive to meet his buddy, the car's owner.

We sat in the owner's apartment, the driver lecturing me before letting me call my parents. It was the worst trouble I had ever been in. When my Dad picked up the phone, my voice broke as I strained to pick up any sign of just how mad he was, but all he said was that he was on his way over.

The next five minutes were the proverbial longest of my life as I rehearsed my apology in my mind and contemplated my approaching spanking, grounding, or worse. My eyes were glued on the door, kind of imagining my dad's glowering face storming across the room at me.

The doorbell rang, the owner opened the door, my dad brushed by him and rushed right over to fold me up in a huge hug. The driver talked about how he hoped my dad would talk some sense into me. My father just wrote out a check for the damage, a substantial advance

on my allowance, and, looking up, said, “We will certainly be talking about this, and I doubt he will ever do this again. But this is my son. Don’t you ever put my son or anybody else’s child into a car and drive them away again. I’ve called the police. You can tell them your side of the story when they get here.” He took me by the hand and we were off.

Faithfulness. Trustworthiness. Being there for us. Love. God the Father’s valedictory speech, given millions of times a day through very human fathers all over the world. Happy Father’s Day. **Amen.**

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1 Abraham J. Twerski, *Simchah: It’s Not Just Happiness* (Shaar Press, 2006), p. 10.

2 Tim Russert, *Wisdom of our Fathers: Lessons and Letters from Daughters and Sons* (Random House, 2007), p. xvii.