October 25, 2026 — Sermon

Scripture Reading: Deuteronomy 34:1–12
Gospel Reading: Matthew 22:34–40

“The Story We Become”

When I was in seminary in Atlanta, I heard an interesting story about George Washington. Of course, I knew who George Washington was. He was the first president of the United States. Even people in Korea know that. But there was one story about him that I had never heard before. Have you heard the story about George Washington and the cherry tree? I guess you all know it. Well, I was probably the only one in the classroom who didn’t! As the story goes, when George Washington was a little boy, he received a hatchet as a gift. He was so excited to have his own little axe. I suppose he couldn’t wait to try it out. But in his excitement, he damaged one of his father’s cherry trees. When his father asked him what had happened, young George answered, “I cannot tell a lie. I did it.”

What a wonderful story about honesty! But here’s the interesting part. Historians tell us that this story probably never happened. It was popularized by a biographer after Washington’s death. Isn't that interesting? A story that probably never happened has taught Americans the importance of telling the truth for generations. Sometimes, stories do more than tell us what happened in the past. They tell us what kind of people we ought to become. Whether or not a particular story actually happened, the stories we remember and share can become part of who we are. And when we recognize those same stories in one another, we discover something we have in common. We recognize that we belong to a community that shares a history, certain values, and a sense of identity.

The Israelites also had stories they passed down from generation to generation. Stories about Abraham and Sarah, slavery in Egypt, liberation, and their journey through the wilderness. These were not simply stories about their ancestors. They were stories that shaped their identity as a people. We are people bound together by shared stories. What distinguishes one community from another is not simply where we come from, but the stories we remember, share, and try to live by. Over the past several months, we have followed the stories of Israel’s ancestors, from Genesis through Exodus, and now to Deuteronomy. These stories tell us who Israel was, which God they worshiped, and how they were called to live. To us, they may seem like ancient stories from a distant past. But for the people of Israel, they were the foundation of their identity. Generation after generation, people heard these

stories, remembered them, retold them, and reinterpreted them in light of their own lives.

And that brings us to today's reading from Deuteronomy. In chapter 34, Moses stands on Mount Nebo, looking out over the land God had promised to Israel. He can see the land, but he will never enter it. Moses dies there, before reaching the destination toward which he had led his people for so many years. But his death is not the end of the story. Joshua takes up the responsibility of leading the next generation. God's covenant and the teachings of Moses continue to be passed down from one generation to another. Moses was gone, but the story lived on.

And centuries later, Jesus, too, inherited that story. He grew up within the Jewish tradition, hearing the stories of Moses, the Exodus, and God's covenant with Israel. And when someone asked him which commandment was the greatest, Jesus turned to the very Scriptures his people had treasured for generations. He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." And then he added, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." These were not new commandments. The first came from Deuteronomy, and the second from Leviticus. Both belonged to the faith that Israel had carried through generations. But what is especially interesting is what Jesus said about the second commandment. He said, "And a second is like it." And then he declared that on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

Think about that for a moment. For generations, the people of Israel had remembered the Exodus, studied the Law, and passed down the stories of their ancestors. They remembered how God had rescued them from slavery and led them through the wilderness. But their stories also remembered their failures. They complained, doubted, and sometimes turned away from God. In other words, remembering that they were God's people did not always mean they lived as God's people. And perhaps that is why these commandments matter so much. Jesus brought his people back to the heart of their faith. Love God. Love your neighbor. These are two different commandments, but they cannot be separated. To love God is to love our neighbors. And vice versa.

Of course, we can say that we love God. We can sing about God's love, pray about God's love, and talk about God's love every Sunday. But what happens when we meet a neighbor who needs our help? What happens when someone is lonely, when someone is struggling, or when someone is difficult to love? That is when our love becomes more than words. That is when the story we believe becomes the life we live.

And I think this is an important question for us as a church. These walls have witnessed generations of faith. People have worshiped here, taught children, cared

for one another, and served their neighbors. We have inherited their stories, their traditions, and their faith. And we should remember them with gratitude. But remembering is not the same as living. We may know every story about our church. We may remember the names of those who built it and the people who served here before us. But people outside our churches may not know any of those stories. So how will they know who we are? They will know us by the way we live. By how we welcome someone who is new. By how we care for someone who is sick. By whether we take time to listen to someone who is hurting. By whether we offer kindness, even when no one is watching. Jesus said in John's Gospel, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Our stories tell us who we are. But our actions show the world who we are.

And there is one more thing I want us to remember. None of us began this story. Just as Moses inherited the faith of those before him, and Jesus inherited the faith of Israel, we have received our faith from generations before us. And one day, we will pass it on. Moses never entered the Promised Land. He could only look toward the future that others would experience. Perhaps we are not so different. We may never see everything that grows from the love we offer today. A child we encourage, a stranger we welcome, a neighbor we help—these small acts may become part of someone else's story long after we are gone.

And that brings me back to George Washington and the cherry tree. Whether that story really happened or not, it has reminded generations of people of the importance of honesty. But knowing the story does not make someone honest. Living by it does. And knowing the story of God's love does not, by itself, make us loving people. Living that love does. We have inherited a wonderful story. A story of faith, hope, and God's enduring love. Now it is our turn to live it. We did not begin this story, and we will not be the ones to finish it. But through the way we love God and love our neighbors, we become part of it. So let us not only remember the story. Let us become the story we have received. Amen.

Let us pray. Faithful God, we thank you for the stories of faith passed down through generations. We are grateful for those who came before us and for the love that brought us here today. May we not simply preserve what we have received, but live it with faithfulness and love. Let our actions tell others of your grace, and may the story of your love continue through us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.