

Twenty-First Sunday After Pentecost
Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Matthew 22:34-46

Unfinished Business*

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The Church of the Transfiguration
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Last Saturday evening, I attended a performance of Puccini's *Turandot* at the Met. *Turandot* is one of those works that immediately come to mind when you hear the words "grand opera." Everything about it is grand – its music, its characters, and its sets and costumes. The most famous aria from the opera, "Nessun Dorma," was Luciano Pavarotti's signature song. And the aria's recording by the Three Tenors achieved triple platinum status and lasting pop culture fame.

One of the most interesting things about *Turandot*, however, is that Puccini died before it was finished. At the opera's premiere in Milan in 1926, the conductor Arturo Toscanini did a beautiful thing. He abruptly ended the performance in the middle of Act III. Toscanini laid down his baton and announced to the audience, "Here the opera ends, because at this point the maestro died." Another composer, Franco Alfano, had finished the final act of the opera based upon musical sketches that Puccini had left behind prior to his death.

Turandot is not the only work of cultural significance that was left unfinished. Raphael's famous painting of the Transfiguration was also left unfinished when the painter died. You can see a stained glass reproduction of this painting in our Joseph of Arimathea mortuary chapel right behind the organ. And some of the greatest works of systematic theology – Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* and Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics* – were also left unfinished.

Reinhold Niebuhr, the famous twentieth-century theologian and ethicist, once wrote that "Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime." All these examples of "unfinished business" by Puccini, Raphael, Aquinas, and Barth are important reminders of this truism. Ultimately, nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in a lifetime.

In today's Hebrew Bible reading from the Book of Deuteronomy, we hear about the death and burial of Moses. For the last ten Sundays, we have heard about Moses' remarkable life story – from his birth and rescue by the Hebrew midwives, to the Burning Bush, to the Passover and Exodus from Egypt, to the parting of the Red Sea, to the forty years of wandering in the wilderness, and to the receiving of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai.

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And despite Moses' remarkable life story and his singular goal of bringing the Israelite people to the promised land, Moses never gets there. He never actually steps foot in Canaan. God shows Moses the promised land from the top of Mount Nebo, but tells him that "you shall not cross over there." Moses dies shortly thereafter and is buried in an unmarked grave. He is succeeded by Joshua, who ultimately leads the Israelites into the promised land.

To some, it may seem like a cruel decision by God not to let Moses see the fruits of his labor. The Book of Numbers tells us that Moses could not enter the promised land because he had disobeyed God in the wilderness at Meribah. And what was this act of disobedience? Well, Moses at one time had decided to strike a rock with his staff to get water, instead of speaking to the rock as God had commanded. Because of this one act of disobedience, God told Moses that he could not bring the Israelites into the promised land. Pretty harsh, indeed.

But I think about Niebuhr's statement that nothing worth doing can be achieved in a lifetime. Moses was a human being, like all of us. He was not immortal, and he had to die sometime. But more importantly, the fact that Joshua (and not Moses) was the one who led the Israelites into the promised land reminded the Israelites that their salvation was God's doing, and not due to any one person – even someone as remarkable as Moses.

Moses' death, and his passing of the mantle to Joshua, reminds me of the great movements of our time. All of these movements – the women's rights movement, the civil rights movement, the LGBT rights movement, and others – had remarkable, charismatic leaders like Moses. I think of Susan B. Anthony. Sojourner Truth. Martin Luther King, Jr. Harvey Milk. But those leaders eventually needed to pass on the torch to the next generation. And that generation eventually needed to pass on its torch to a new generation. And so on.

As the current social climate reminds us every day, the work of fighting social sins such as sexism, racism, homophobia, and xenophobia remains unfinished. Just when we think that we've made progress or turned a corner, something inevitably happens that sets us back. Indeed, nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in a lifetime.

I recently came across a wonderful quote from Dorothy Day, the co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement. Day dedicated her life to serving the poor and fighting for social justice. She wrote powerfully about our place in the larger "chain of being" that is the Christian tradition. Day reminded us that we are dependent on those who came before us, as well as those who will come after us. She wrote:

Our lives are touched by those who lived centuries ago, and we hope that our lives will mean something to people who won't be alive until centuries from now. It's a great "chain of being," someone once told me, and I think our job is to do the best we can to hold up our small segment of the chain doing [our] best to

keep that chain connected, unbroken. Our arms are linked – we try to be neighbors of [Christ], and to speak up for his principles. That’s a lifetime’s job.

I love the image of our arms being linked in solidarity with those who came before us and who will come after us. To me, that’s what it means to live out the great commandments as taught by Jesus in today’s Gospel reading. We hold up “our small segment of the chain” by following Jesus’ command to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind. We also hold up the chain by following Jesus’ command to love our neighbors as ourselves.

During this season of stewardship, I think about the great chain of being that is the Church of the Transfiguration. None of us would be sitting here today without the significant sacrifices of time, talent, and treasure by the parishioners, staff, and clergy who came before us during the past 169 years. And the only way that our beloved parish will continue for another 169 years (or longer) is if each of us does our part to hold up what Dorothy Day calls “our small segment of the chain.”

Theologically speaking, that’s why it’s so important for each and every one of us to make a pledge for the coming year. It doesn’t matter how small or how large our pledge is. What matters is the act of pledging itself. What matters is that we commit to keeping our own small segment of the chain connected and unbroken.

Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime. That is certainly true, as we learn from Moses’ death in today’s reading from the Hebrew Bible. But we ultimately transcend our individual lifetimes when we link our arms together in the great “chain of being” that is the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.

As we celebrate All Souls’ Day this coming Thursday evening – and All Saints’ Day next Sunday – we give thanks for all those who have come before us. We also give thanks for all those who surround us today. But most importantly, we give thanks to all those who will come after us. For nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in a lifetime.