

## **“Sometimes It’s OK Not To Finish What We Start”**

**Deuteronomy 34:1-12**

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Many of us were raised with the old adage, “Finish what you started,” and thus we feel a measure of guilt any time we do not heed it. Whether an exercise program, work project, or anything else, finishing what we start is essential for our emotional wellbeing and sense of self-worth. Some of us even struggle with the very idea of not finishing any book we have started, though I must say I have been liberated from that false requirement of moral character.

In a journal I read, an author wrote about her newly discovered ability to make peace with not finishing some books. I sighed deeply in relief as I was bogged down in an Umberto Eco novel that did not approach the quality of two I had previously read. It still sits on my shelf as a reminder that sometimes it is OK not to finish a book.

I have a sense that many of us need a similar kind of permission not to finish other things because while finishing what we start is a good idea in general, sometimes we discover something isn’t worth it, sometimes life throws something more significant at us, and sometimes we just don’t get to finish.

Perhaps we can learn something from Moses at this point. In our reading from Deuteronomy, he confronts a situation where he cannot finish something he has started, something rather significant – leading the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt into the Promised Land. God takes him up from the plains of Moab, east of the Jordan River, all the way to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, where he can survey the land promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Then, God says, “I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.” Moses is not allowed to enter the Promised Land. He cannot finish what he started.

How does he feel about this? The text doesn’t say. Perhaps he feels relieved not to have to lead this miserable flock of people anymore;

this grumbling, whining lot of ungrateful wretches. This was God's idea in the first place, not his. These are God's people, as he has reminded God often, not his. Let someone else lead them!

I think of the mother in Warrenton whose two young boys spread lard all over the interior of her brand new car while she went into the grocery store. When she came out and discovered what they had done, she stood at the car screaming to anyone who would listen, "Would someone take these boys from me? Now! Please!" And she meant it, at least in that moment, and a few others. Moses has earned the right to feel this way about the Israelites, whether he does or not, the right to feel relief at not having to lead them anymore.

And let's be honest, the next part of this journey is one he may prefer not to be part of anyway. What exactly does Moses not get to finish? Leading the people into the Promised Land. How does that go? Not very well because there are already people in the land. In the book of Joshua, God tells the Israelites how to solve this problem – by killing everyone who is there. Thus begins a cycle of violence that region is living with to this day. It is a difficult story to take literally. Perhaps Moses should feel relieved that he does not have to finish this part of the story. There has been enough killing on his watch already.

But he may also feel angry at the notion of someone else getting the glory of crossing the finish line after he has done all the work, someone who has a name – Joshua. He may feel guilty at not getting the job done after all this. Did he take a wrong turn? Was he not faithful enough? Could he have done something to prevent those people from making that Golden Calf, even while he was on the mountain with God? It's not as if he hasn't had enough time to get there – forty years to walk a short distance. We don't know what Moses feels – guilt, anger, relief?

What we know is that scripture offers an explanation for why Moses doesn't get to enter the Promised Land, though not everyone buys it. In Numbers 20:12, God tells Moses he will not bring the Israelites into the new land because he has not trusted God. Moses has just brought water from a rock for a third time, just as God has commanded, but this time he strikes the rock with his staff, which he did before, but apparently, he isn't supposed to this time. It's not clear. We just know

the claim is that his lack of trust is the problem, though everyone else has less trust than him. Why does anyone get to enter the land?

Renowned British Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, said, “The fact that Moses was not destined to enter the promised land was not a punishment but the very condition of his (and our) mortality (*The Christian Century*, October 2023, p. 29).” We all have limits, we are all mortal, this is why Moses died before entering the Promised Land. Someone has also suggested that Moses didn’t enter the land to demonstrate the need for another leader who would follow him. There are many possibilities.

But whatever the reason for Moses not quite making it into the land, the biblical tradition views him as the greatest of all prophets. The text ends by saying that there has never been another prophet like Moses, one who knew God face to face, who performed mighty deeds and terrifying displays of power to free his people. Even if Moses is being punished at the end of his journey, this experience does not define him, at least not from God’s perspective.

Moses may feel like it does. Great people are usually hard on themselves, they are rarely self-congratulatory. It is reported that every Monday morning, when Harry Emerson Fosdick met with fellow preachers George Buttrick and Paul Scherer, Fosdick would slump into the room saying, “I blew it again.” He thought every sermon he preached was a dud. A line in Harry Chapin’s song “Mr. Tanner” says this, “He did not know how well he sang; he only heard the flaws.”

Perhaps Moses feels this way about his life, he can only see the mistakes, he can only see the flaws, but God does not. Biblical tradition views Moses as the greatest of all prophets, even though he does not get to enter the Promised Land. Faithful Jews and Christians honor him to this day. Surely God views him this way as well.

The message for us is that sometimes it’s OK not to finish what we start. Now, I did say “sometimes.” This does not apply to any children whose parents have told them they will finish this dance class or these piano lessons or this one season of baseball or soccer. Sometimes we need to follow through with our commitments and give something a chance to see what we really think of it. But sometimes we don’t.

If we are in a degree program and discern that this line of study or work is not for us, it's OK not to finish. Such discernment is an important part of life. If we thought a work project would be productive but midway through discover we were wrong, it makes no sense to continue down a futile path. Sometimes not finishing is just prudent.

Yet often, especially when it comes to matters of faith and life in the church, not finishing is simply a function of reality. If our goals are small enough, we may be able to reach them. But if they are larger, part of God's realm, the work will be ongoing, and thus we need not feel bound to measure our success by the completion of every task. Rather, faithfulness to what matters most in God's eyes is the key, faithfulness to the great loves Jesus talks about in the reading from Matthew.

Near the end of his far-too-short life, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said that he could see the promised land of racial equality, clearly echoing the experience of Moses described in Deuteronomy 34. He said he was not sure he would get to enter the promised land, again echoing that text, and reflecting the reality that he had received many death threats. But he was sure that the people would one day get there.

As we know, his sense of impending death was well-founded. He was shot and killed on April 4, 1968 on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee which is now the site of the National Civil Rights Museum. Visiting it is like visiting Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem, an experience of profound yet needful grief.

But was Dr. King a failure because he didn't finish the job? Or was he a great prophet like Moses because he was faithful to a pursuit that was worth everything yet large enough to be unachievable in one lifetime – racial justice, the beloved community, God's intent for all humankind? There are some things we cannot finish, or perhaps better put, we finish all we can and leave the rest to God and to those through whom God will continue the work.

But there is another message for us in this story. There is a reminder that God's work is bigger than any one of us. Many partners are needed to bring near the realm of God. This is the case with any ministry of significance in this church – the children's, student, and music ministries; Sunday School; the clothing ministry; Toy Joy; the

give-back food truck. While leadership is important, none of these ministries can be carried out by any one person. This is the case with mission work around the world. We can only be in one place at a time. Our field personnel through CBF extend our presence around the world, to wherever people are hurting and in need.

But it's not just that we need other people around us in the present moment. Many faithful people have come before us, preparing the way, beginning the Baptist movement, founding this church, establishing these buildings, beginning rich traditions. And many faithful people will come after us, thank God, continuing some work, discontinuing things that no longer serve the Gospel best, beginning new work.

This means we don't have to finish it all, which is good news because we won't. Even Moses has to pass along leadership to Joshua. We're like runners in a relay race who have the baton for a time but then pass it on to the next generation. We need to finish our split well and not drop the baton, but then it is time to pass it on. But more than that, Moses prepares Joshua for the task, laying hands on him. So, one of the most important things we can do is prepare those who will come after us. It's why children's and youth ministries are so important. Who else will continue the work of the church after us?

There is much we can learn from Moses. Elie Wiesel says it is not a surprise that Moses occupies a special place in Jewish tradition. "His passion for social justice, his struggle for national liberation, his triumphs and disappointments, his poetic inspiration, his gifts as a strategist and his organizational genius, his complex relationship with God and God's people... his bursts of anger, his silences... no individual ever, anywhere, accomplished so much for so many... His influence is boundless, it reverberates beyond time. The Law bears his name, the Talmud is but its commentary and Kabbala communicates only its silence (*Messengers of God*, p. 182)."

And all of this is true. Moses accomplished many great things. But perhaps most helpful for us is the knowledge that he was not perfect. He didn't even get to finish the work he started. As strange as this may sound, it is good news for us.