

THE SHOULDERS WE STAND ON
DEUTERONOMY 34:1-14; MATTHEW 22: 34-46
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I want to talk with you about stewardship today and over the next several weeks. Today's story from Deuteronomy is a good place to start. Moses, the great leader, passes the baton of leadership to Joshua – a young, promising leader.

Like Brahms under the shadow of Beethoven, feeling the weight, the grandeur of his predecessor, wondering if he was up to the task. Then producing his First Symphony, influenced by Beethoven but clearly, brilliantly Brahms' own work.

In college, I wondered if my class could provide the same inspiration we received from the class ahead of us – some of those upper classmen set the bar very high. In one short summer we went from followers to leaders.

Consider Moses. Israel's ultimate leader. Maybe when you think of him you think of Charlton Heston with fake whiskers but the truth of it, says one writer, is he probably looked more like Tevye the milkman after ten rounds with Muhammad Ali.

Moses was a tough old bird. Forty years tramping through the wilderness, keeping that rag tag band of former slaves in line. They were constantly complaining, not enough food, not enough water, wished they were back enjoying the city lights of Cairo. When he turned his back on them they made a golden calf and forgot him.

Finally, in today's story, after all those years of wandering they get to the gateway of the Promised Land. God takes them up to Mt. Pisgah. The beauty of the land of milk and honey stretches out before them. Gilead as far as Dan, all of Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, the Negeb, the Plain, the valley of Jericho as far as Zoar. It was a beautiful, glorious sight.

Martin Luther King, Jr. visited such a mountain before he led the March on Washington. Speaking at the foot of the Lincoln Memorial he described the view this way.

"I say to you my friends, even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream....that one day the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood....that the state of Mississippi sweltering with the heat of injustice will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice....that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today."¹

The point I want to make this morning is that all of us stand on the shoulders of someone. Someone who has gone before us. Someone like Moses or Martin Luther King, Jr. who could see out into a Promised Land stretching before them. A land they'd been journeying toward and sacrificing for. A land they longed to bring their people into. A land of peace and justice and abundance and freedom.

I was talking to our church historian John McClive the other night at our coffee/dessert. We were in the lovely home of Ginny and Chuck Harrington in Orchard Park.

John and I got to reminiscing about some of the great leaders of this congregation.

Samuel VanVranken Holmes, Albert George Butzer, Ray Kiely, and Thomas Penny Stewart. Senior pastors over the last century. There were other leaders of course. The music ministers and pastors and staff who worked with those senior pastors. The elders and deacons who forged the ministries of Westminster over the last century. So when I use the names of the senior pastors I am referring to them yes but also to that cadre of staff and lay leaders and congregations who served with them.

It is their shoulders we stand on. And just as God took Moses up to Mt. Pisgah and Martin Luther King, Jr. to that mountain top where he could see a new America, God also took Holmes and Butzer and Kiely and Stewart to a special place where they could see a Promised Land.

They were big, strong, articulate, passionate, visionary men. I know, Ray Kiely was only about 5'8" but his voice and vision towered over this community.

Sometimes we are so familiar with their names, with their portraits, with the honor they hold in our congregational history that we forget what they faced and how they led. How they brought our ancestors through the wilderness and desert of their times to a mountain top where they could see the land of promise for this community. A land of freedom for the poor and oppressed of Buffalo and beyond.

Those are the shoulders we stand on. And like Brahms who stood on the shoulders of Beethoven the music we play today, the song of freedom we sing, the Gospel of justice we preach includes the melodies and themes they bequeathed to this congregation.

Dr. Holmes came to Westminster in the early 1890s. A time when a firestorm of controversy swept across the nation. A debate that raged in seminaries and newspapers and pulpits and classrooms.

The debate was over how to read the Bible. The new science of evolution and geology caused scholars to question if the Bible was literally true. Was it really written by Moses? Was the world really created in six days? This debate shook the foundations of many churches including Westminster.

Before Dr. Holmes arrived many members left Westminster disagreeing about how to read and understand the Bible. But his progressive biblical interpretation became a defining mark. His preaching here was a beacon for thinking people. His application of the Bible to the new discoveries of science and technology led Westminster into the 20th century.

Dr. Holmes is also remembered for his outreach into this community. During his time from 1893 to 1932, Buffalo was thriving. People came from all over the nation and world to work here. Thousands of immigrants from Europe. Within a year of his arrival Dr. Holmes established Westminster House on the East Side. It was devoted to helping new immigrants survive in the New World. In a day when you had to take the trolley to get there hundreds of members traveled the rails to Westminster House.

Holmes was thoroughly modern. A thinking person who used the Gospel to inspire Westminster to forge a ministry of outreach that became a hallmark of this church. And not just outreach but conscience. When the FBI came to Buffalo in 1919 and arrested several people suspected of having ties to the Communist Party after the Bolshevik Revolution. Dr. Holmes was the only public person in Western New York to protest that violation of civil rights.

He set the pace for this congregation with his great intellect and challenging preaching. We stand today on the shoulders of Dr. Holmes' progressive theology and outreach to the poor.

Dr. Butzer followed Holmes in 1932. Many wondered if the new pastor could fill the shoes of his luminary predecessor – known for his radio sermons and weekly public lectures on religion and life.

I am not sure when they stopped wondering. But Dr. Butzer reached the same high stature as Dr. Holmes. He led this congregation out of economic depression, through a world war and into the boom years of the 1950s – a time when Buffalo was strong and prosperous.

Westminster's membership soared to its highest level under his leadership. He was not the intellectual Holmes was but the times were different too. During his ministry the Holmes Chapel was constructed, the Case Library dedicated and the School of Religious Impression, today WECP, founded.

And these remarkable stained glass windows were installed. Scenes from the Gospel on the south wall. Scenes from the Old Testament on the north wall. You could spend years studying these windows. They bear the imprint of Dr. Butzer's love for the Bible. It was his idea to install the window depicting the forgiving love of Hosea, Dr. Butzer's favorite prophet, who welcomed home Gomer, his prostituted wife, directly across the aisle from the story of the Prodigal Son and loving father who welcomed his boy home.

Our relationship to Temple Beth Zion was initiated by Dr. Butzer and Rabbi Fink; Westminster's members – many of them executives with Buffalo's Fortune 500 companies – were leaders in community service agencies because Dr. Butzer challenged them to live their Christian faith. We stand today on Dr. Butzer's commanding, compassionate shoulders.

Dr. Kiely ministered here from 1962 to 1970. He happens to be the uncle of our own Gretchen Nichols. After Westminster he served Grosse Pointe Presbyterian Church in Detroit – a large, influential congregation.

Dr. Kiely began here two months before Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from A Birmingham Jail." It was the early 60s a time of profound social change. Ray Kiely dreamed of a church where the old hostilities between Protestant and Catholic, Christian and Jew would be ended. He envisioned a church in service to the poor wherever they were. Under Ray Kiely Westminster supported more missionaries than ever before.

Even though his tenure was brief his preaching and his wide, ecumenical/interfaith vision have left a deep mark. We stand today on the shoulders of Dr. Kiely's ecumenical spirit and commitment to mission.

I remember my predecessor Thomas Penny Stewart well. He was admired as a bold and prophetic leader in our presbytery during the 70s and 80s. A time when this city and nation were still undergoing the deep change begun in the 60s.

Tom was active in the civil rights movement. He put this church at the forefront of the debate over welcoming and including gay men and women in the life and decision-making of the church. He possessed a formidable intellect and an elegant, engaging personality and dry wit.

Whenever he saw me and any of my associate pastor cohorts entering a presbytery meeting he would ask with a twinkle in his eye and hope in his voice, “what trouble are you going to get us into today? I’ll vote for anything you guys propose as long as it’s radical and prophetic.” Those were the days of More Light, Nuclear Freeze and Liberation Theology.

This sanctuary is a legacy of Tom’s ministry. Restored to original beauty, it is a statement of the commitment to this city that has characterized Westminster’s core belief, as Matthew says, to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength.

Tom initiated a strong Alcoholics Anonymous program and the quiet ministry of the Alcohol Committee. He believed in the importance of the church to individual growth and healing. Programs on suicide bereavement and programs for elderly members and scholarships for needy college students were part of his vision.

We stand today on Tom Stewart’s shoulders of prophetic preaching and progressive leadership during radical transition in our city and nation.

The first point this morning is that we stand on the shoulders of a gifted lineage of pastors and congregations that precede us. The second point is that Moses did not enter the Promised Land he saw from the mountain top. That was left for Joshua to accomplish. Moses got the people this far. A new generation of leaders had to take it from here.

I don’t know why it has been left for us, for you and me, to change the course of our stewardship habits after 149 years. Any of our predecessors could have done it before us. But it really doesn’t matter. It is God’s call to this generation, to us.

We are now determining how our children will remember us. Joshua stood on Moses’ shoulders when he saw the Promised Land. It befell Joshua to take that land from the Canaanite tribes who lived in it. Because he did Saul could stand on Joshua’s shoulders and David could stand on Saul’s. And one day, as Matthew makes clear this morning, Jesus would stand on David’s shoulders.

The Promised Land God calls you and me to inhabit is a land of giving, free of reliance on a wealthy few or a vibrant stock market. A new land of generosity for Christ’s ministry that will keep Westminster whole.

The baton of leadership will be in your hand this week in the form of a pledge card. Future generations are depending on the response you make on that card. They will need shoulders no less broad than those we stand on today. Amen.

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr. “Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Electrifies a Nation with His Call for an End to Segregation and Racial Discrimination,” *In Our Words: Extraordinary Speeches of the American Century*, edited by Robert Torricelli and Andrew Carroll (Washington Square Press: New York, 1999)235.