

Unfinished Business  
Deuteronomy 34:1-5  
First Christian Church, Coralville, IA  
Sunday, May 3, 2026  
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Christian Church Foundation

In the work that I do for the Foundation, attending funerals and memorial services is a constant part of my calendar. I buy sympathy cards in bulk. We encourage people to write wills and remember the church when they die. Eventually we have to say goodbye to those generous people knowing that gifts will pass on to worthy charitable organizations.

My own mother died 11 years ago. She was 88 years old, was a dedicated church member, and had a long career as a nurse. Her life was celebrated in grand fashion at the FCC in McPherson, KS, and we buried her ashes in a red cookie jar.

Mom was certainly not ready to die. She was active in many social clubs, and she attended Disciples Women meetings. She sang alto in the choir. She was the church historian and took pictures at every event. However, she never quite made the transition to digital or cell phone photos, so she kept Walmart in business with her 35 mm film processing!

But Mom's real claim to fame was her masterful skills in the kitchen. She won ribbons at the state fair for her divinity and fudge. She could whip up a batch of cookies for any event, at any time of the day. But more than anything else, Mom was known for her peanut brittle.

The labor, skill, and oversight needed to create a perfect batch of peanut brittle are what she perfected. After she died I found countless thank-you notes from people, applauding her wonderful peanut brittle. In the last 25 years of her candy-making she began ordering peanuts from Oklahoma. Usually, 50 or 100 pounds each year. If you were on Mom's "good" list, she gave it for free. Others, who wanted larger quantities or didn't know Mom quite as well, had to pay for it.

When Mom went into the nursing home I began making the rounds around town to the banks, doctors' offices, insurance agency, and even the car dealership, and everyone said the same thing: "Now where will we get our peanut brittle??" She donated brittle to local charities for their fundraisers. Their source was now gone.

My Mom, and everyone who knew her, was not ready for her to face the end. But then, who ever really is?

This experience has reminded me of a quote by Reinhold Niebuhr, that, nothing worth doing can be done in a single lifetime. As we all busy ourselves living our lives, raising families, building a career, and working in church, we often realize that our work cannot be done in a single lifetime, and at some point we must entrust it to others who come behind us. We often will leave this world with unfinished business.

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The life of Moses gives us a biblical example of a great leader who left this earth with unfinished business. Throughout the early books of the Old Testament, we read of all of Moses' encounters with God and caring for his people. He performed miraculous signs that God had sent him. Moses was a leader who served his people and was obedient to God. God molded and shaped Moses to use him to lead the people of Israel.

But because of one incident of disobedience, God does not allow Moses to enter the Promised Land. As they arrive at the gateway of the land of milk and honey, God says, you've led your people to this place, and now it's time for someone else to take them there. And in verse 5, we read, Moses dies. Period. End of story.

Moses was a great leader, who did great things, but his journey of service came to an end, and it was up to the next generation, led by Joshua, to write the next chapter in the life journey of the Israelites.

Think also about the life of King David. He accomplished great things during his lifetime, but he left some unfinished business of his own.

As a devout man who wanted to honor God, David planned to construct the Temple for the Ark of the Covenant, but political problems forced him to delay construction. Despite the grand and glorious plans that he had drawn up to build the temple; it simply was not to be.

God said to David: You shall not build a house in my name, because you have shed so much blood in my sight on the earth and you have waged great wars. Your son Solomon will build a house for my name.

David replies: My son Solomon is young and inexperienced and the house that is to be built must be exceedingly magnificent, famous and glorified throughout all lands. David, accepting the fact that he will never get to build the temple, does everything he can to prepare his son to do it.

In anticipation of this great construction project, David accumulated immense quantities of gold, silver, bronze, precious stones and exotic woods. He then bequeathed these assets to his son Solomon, along with God's plan and instruction for the design of the Temple.

David's greatest contribution to the temple would not be the construction, but the preparation. David's legacy lived on through the life of his son Solomon.

When King David prepared his will and dedicated these assets and plans for building the Temple, he prayed: "But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you and we have given you only what comes from your hand...all of this abundance we have provided for building you a Temple for your Holy Name, comes from your hand, and it all belongs to you."

This prayer of David sets the chief biblical principle for all philanthropy. Since we are all God's creation, and all we have comes from God, anything we "own" really belongs to God. Our philanthropy then becomes a stewardship of giving a portion back for whatever good we are led to support, both during our days of life on earth and then at our death for the generations who come behind us.

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When we all reach the end of our lives, no doubt we will leave some task undone, some business unfinished, some mission project unfulfilled. The honey-do list may be left on the refrigerator with items never to be crossed off.

In verse 7 of the scripture, we see that even though he was 120 years old, Moses was as strong as ever, and his eyesight was still good. He probably had many more good years left to serve God.

The reality is that none of us can ever live long enough to finish it all. That's why we must entrust our unfinished Godly business to others.

And there is no better place to do that, but through the church. In the church we are born, baptized, married, and buried. Or as some would say, we are hatched, matched and dispatched. In a church we find comfort and solace in times of distress, and we celebrate and rejoice in times of happiness. We should consider leaving more than an empty pew when we die, to carry out that business.

I'd like to tell you a story about Sally Smith—a name which might be familiar to you, as this church receives an annual gift from a permanent fund she established over 15 years ago. Any of you who might have known Sally know that she was a humble yet generous person. Our relationship started with a short letter she wrote in 1997 indicating an interest in setting up a gift for church causes and trusts to benefit a niece and a nephew. For the next 13 years I enjoyed my many visits with Sally and helping her accomplish her charitable goals.

She was a fierce University of Iowa supporter and I enjoyed watching a football game in her living room one Saturday afternoon. Sally directed the campus ministry program at the University for many years and had also served as assistant minister for this church. After attending business school in Ohio, she went to seminary at Lexington Theological Seminary in Kentucky, during the days when women only pursued careers in religious education. After the Vietnam War she made 3 trips to that country, taking with her people who had a desire to help heal the wounds that war had torn open between the 2 countries. I heard countless stories about her many fishing trips.

Upon her death in 2010 her estate created a permanent fund with the Foundation, as well as two family trusts to benefit a niece and nephew throughout their lifetimes. Her plan is one where not only is the church blessed, but her heirs are, as well. Christian Church Foundation was honored to help her put those plans in place.

Each year her permanent fund pays income to six causes she supported during her life, which now benefit from her legacy after her death. Global Ministries, Lexington Theological Seminary, Week of Compassion, Higher Education in Leadership Ministries, Disciples Mission Fund, and of course, First Christian Church, Coralville.

Often when I make a presentation in a congregation about remembering the church in our estate planning, people often say, "I don't have a lot of money. Anything I might leave to the church won't amount to much." My response is this: God does not want equal giving. God only wants equal generosity. And to be true philanthropist doesn't mean a gift has to have a lot of numbers. A philanthropist is simply defined as one who loves humankind. The simplest of gifts, when given with love and thanksgiving, is a gift worth celebrating.

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Back to Mom's peanut brittle: For those of you lamenting the fact that her candy is forever dead? Well, it has been resurrected. Several years before Mom died my brother in Topeka decided to learn the skill. He became so good at it that at Christmas one year our family had a "taste-off" contest and it was a tie as to which batch was better. So of course it was Tim who inherited the 125-year-old cast iron skillet from Mom, where she concocted every delicious batch. And now, it is Tim's peanut brittle that carries on our mother's memory.

Mom's unfinished business is now in the skillful hands of her son.

I pray God's blessings on this congregation and its members, with its gifts and graces for mission and ministry, as we each seek to pass on our unfinished business to the next generation, and as we all seek to build the kingdom of God here on earth. AMEN.