



Pastor Ken's Sermon

SERMON – REFORMATION SUNDAY

JOHN 8:31-36

OCTOBER 30, 2022

“THREE LITTLE WORDS”

Years ago, my cousin Amy created a website devoted to the Nelson family – in particular “*the war years.*” She posted letters her mom, my cousin Susan and her grandma – my Aunt Millie had saved from those years. One of the first is a telegram Aunt Millie sent to her parents from Pearl Harbor, dated December 9th, 1941. She lived there with my Uncle Lorne, a Colonel in the U.S. Army, and their infant daughter Susan. Her message said all there was to say – an economical three words... “*all safe, Mildred.*”

Looking at that telegram caused my mind’s eye to drift to that day when Aunt Millie stood, no doubt in a very long line at the Western Union station, to send her message. I wondered how many folks in that line couldn’t, unfortunately, say the same thing. Then I pictured the living room in Minneapolis where my Nelson grandparents lived along with my dad and imagined them frantically opening the message then sliding back into the couch in relief. I also thought of those families stateside who got other news - who instead sank into grief.

A few days later my dad wrote his younger brother telling him he’d be reporting soon to the draft board – this “*doggone war*” (that’s about as colorful of language my dad ever used) had “*changed everything.*” The letters reminded me that memory is not just scattered “*memories*” but re-entering times and places remembered, feeling, or giving a concerted effort to at least, what if you had been there, you would have felt and done.

Curiously, it’s a case of distorted memory that has some Jewish leaders all up in arms in our story from John. Their pointed response to Jesus having said “*If you hold to my teaching you are really my disciples, then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free*” is at best a “*half-truth.*” They were descendants of Abraham. They were *also* slaves of other nations at least twice and for all intents and purposes in the present. The point Jesus is making of course is that apart from Him sinners are slaves all the time - candid teaching that bursts both ancient and modern bubbles of “*people are essentially good*” thinking.

So, to some history. When the descendants of Abraham – to whom Jesus interlocutors appealed had been freed from slavery in the Exodus from Egypt, they held a ceremony led by Joshua, Moses successor, in a place called Shechem. The ceremony was preceded by a history lesson – Joshua walked those assembled back to Abraham and pointedly reminded them he had “*served other gods*”. Shechem was most likely chosen because of what happened there when the Abraham’s grandson Jacob found “*foreign gods*” - tiny little idol statues, in the tents of members of his family.

Genesis 35:1-4 says he ordered them “*put away*” and the confiscated idols were buried under an oak tree at Shechem. In his dedication ceremony, Joshua tells the people to do the same thing – “*choose this day whom you will serve.*” Joshua’s words were intended to awaken the people’s memory and prick their consciences, as if to say “*this is what your ancestors did...now what about you?*”

I hope you see the tactic Joshua is pursuing. He is not asking folks at Shechem to dig around a bunch of oak trees to see if they could find a buried idol. Joshua is saying “*go back to you own tent*” – examine your own thoughts, words and deeds, see what they say about you and how they vie for your affection, and decide if, for the sake of God will you “*put them away.*”

How delicious then, that in our story today from John yet another “*Yeshua*” – the Aramaic for Jesus, would prick the consciences of his listeners in the same manner. Jesus does not employ the phrase “*slave*” lightly. It was intended to make the hairs on the back of his listeners head stand and their chests pound. It was

intended to awaken painful memories, in order to place in proper context how compromised and diminished humans are when we sin.

Joshua at Shechem said *“if you don’t put away your idols”* and follow the Lord, you’re spiritually still in Egypt. In the Old Testament, the word for idol was translated as *“not gods”* – something treated as real, but which was not. So then, are things we may “idolize” other than God real? Well yes, of course they are. People, possessions, pride, political proclivities and prejudices are all “real things” – and harmful to us insofar as we consider them ultimate things. British Theologian N.T. Wright said *“(They) are absolutely nothing to God, or in relation to God, but they are very much something to their worshippers.”*

In our culture today it is said religious belief is losing its grip. Don’t believe that! Proper belief in and obedience to the God of the Bible, yes – but not belief in *“not gods.”* Like Jesus contentious audience in our lesson from John, we rely on and accumulate *“not gods”*. We take good things and make them ultimate things in other words. The Pharisees of Jesus’ day made their people’s history and rituals an ultimate thing and when challenged scrubbed that history – *“we have never been slaves to anyone.”* To admit they were would have meant to confess on one hand they were vulnerable people who’d been rescued by God and on the other sinful people who’d been judged by God. Neither is a pleasing option.

Memory that puts on rose-colored glasses is not history and is not helpful. When I read the letters of my family from the war years, I discovered that while they endured hardship, they did not always think it fair and didn’t like government policies that forced austerity upon them. And I learned that though Christian, they were human – they did not love their enemies as themselves.

Confession is an act of memory – usually recent but always something in our past. We usually aren’t thinking about any wretched future intentions we have – though we do ask God to aid us so that we may instead *“delight in his will and walk in his ways.”* Martin Luther was a student of history. He understood the church’s failures, and that of its Christians. Yet he rallied Christians under the banner of Jesus. He believed that to know Jesus meant you were not simply the soiled product of what you were or what you do – people who run from their past, but who Christ died to make you be – holy in his sight and possessors of a bright future. He understood that to know this truth makes you free. To put it another way – that in Jesus Christ you are and will forever be safe.

To God alone the glory. AMEN