

A SIX WORD LIFE MEMOIR

Sermon, October 4, 2020

World Communion Sunday

Text: Psalm 19, Philippians 1:21

The Time With the Children immediately preceded the sermon, which I introduced by speaking briefly about epitaphs, succinct statements commemorating or epitomizing a deceased person: I displayed a few pictures of headstones with the following humorous epitaphs: In Uniontown, PA: "Here lies the body of Jonathan Blake, Stepped on the gas Instead of the brake." Another: "I Was Hoping For A Pyramid." Another, "Died: For Not Forwarding that Text Message to Ten People." Another, perhaps my favorite, from an Atlanta, Georgia cemetery: "I Told You I Was Sick." On the tombstone of Mel Blanc, "Man of 1000 voices": "That's All, Folks!" And near the Clark family plot in the Birmingham-Lafayette Cemetery of West Chester, PA is the grave of my tenth grade social studies teacher, Keitha Lewis. Miss Lewis never married; from what I'm told, she lived pretty much all her life with her dear sister. She was one some might say was mildly eccentric, a feisty redhead, but she was a thorough and proud professional who took her vocation seriously, a no-nonsense instructor who nevertheless always seemed to have a twinkle in her eye. About twenty years ago, I happened upon Miss Lewis' headstone. Under her name it reads: "BORN: MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS. DIED: JULY 2, 1993. BELOVED TEACHER, FRIEND, SISTER." To economize on paper space, I'll include the main lesson/point of the Time With The Children in the body of this sermon:

You can write a pretty interesting story with just a few words! A few other interesting epitaphs: In a Thurmont, MD, cemetery a headstone reads: "Here lies an Atheist. All dressed up, And no place to go." On a 1880 grave in Nantucket, MA: "Under the sod and under the trees, Lies the body of Jonathan Pease. He is not here, there's only the pod ... Pease shelled out and went to God." The headstone of Harry Edsel Smith of Albany, NY, reads, "Born 1903 - Died 1942. Looked up the elevator shaft to see if the car was on the way down. It was." A widow wrote this epitaph in a Burlington Vermont cemetery: "Sacred to the memory of my husband John Barnes who died January 3, 1803. His comely widow, aged 23, has many qualifications of a good wife, and yearns to be comforted." Written by another widow on her adulterous husband's headstone in Atlanta, GA: "Gone, but not forgiven." Finally, a never-married woman's epitaph in Scranton, PA: "No hits, no runs, no heirs."

Once asked to write a full story in just six words, legend has it that novelist Ernest Hemingway responded with: "For Sale: Baby shoes, never worn." In 2006, fourteen years ago, this Hemingway legend inspired a publication called *Smith Magazine* to invite writers to submit their own life stories in exactly six words; they got (and continue to get) so many responses, that ten books and counting have been published and over one million short life stories have been shared and compiled within SMITH Magazine and its related publications. Fittingly, the title of the premiere book was six words long: Not Quite What I Was Planning, and was subtitled, "Six-Word Memoirs by Famous and Obscure Writers." A sampling of the tiny memoirs: Author Joyce Carol Oates submitted these six words: "Revenge is living well without you." Singer Aimee Mann summed up her life: "Couldn't cope, so I wrote songs." This from a 27-year-old man after a divorce he didn't want: "I still make coffee for two." One more, a rather poignant summary: "Cursed with cancer. Blessed with friends." Three weeks ago, September 11, 2020, Larry Smith (the originator/author of *Six Word Memoirs*) wrote a column in the **New York Times** entitled: "**The Pandemic in Six Word Memoirs**" which included the following submissions: "Finally meeting neighbors after eight years." "Avoiding death, but certainly not living." "Social distancing myself from the fridge." "Not a criminal, but running masked." "Can't smell the campfire on Zoom." "Eighth hour of YouTube. Send Help!" This one from a high school student: "Finally, I can mute my teachers." From another student, apparently weary of online learning and/or missing the activity and company of friends: "I regret saying, 'I hate school.'" And this one who's apparently getting a little too compulsive about sanitizing: "Cleaned Lysol container with Lysol wipe." And this last one, a bit profound: "Changed what I am complaining about."

If you had to sum up your life in just six words, what would you write? As mentioned during the Time with the Children, Paul is writing to the church at Philippi from a prison cell. Even in the extreme social lockdown of prison, Paul is winning converts and inspiring others. Still, he knows his situation is precarious. He knows he could be facing martyrdom and begins to ponder what this all might mean. He sums it all up in what I would like to call a ten word memoir: "For me to live is Christ, to die is gain." (This is a passage we read two weeks ago, but I put off drawing attention to this verse until today). Paraphrased, his conclusion can be summed in six words: "Whatever happens, it's a win/win!" The first part of Philippians 1:21 is a six word memoir worthy of submission to **Smith Magazine**: "For me to live is Christ." What a wonderful way to sum up Paul's life! You know his story: at first, he had been a zealous persecutor of Christians. However, when he was converted on the Damascus Road, he thoroughly submitted himself to Jesus in every way. That is why he had such a profound effect on the development of the early church; that is why about a third of the New Testament comes from his pen. Paul meant it when he said, "For me to live is Christ." That's his six word life memoir.

Back when I was interviewing for another church, one search committee wrote and asked me to put in writing, *"What does it mean to you to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ?"* Now, I knew what they meant, but that sort of terminology is not what I prefer. I try not to speak in jargon, lingo which seeks to somehow distinguish the "real" Christians from the "nominal" ones, using phraseology found nowhere in the New Testament and, frankly, phraseology I find to be a bit presumptuous at best and offensive at worst. Jesus is not my "buddy," nor is He my "boyfriend" or "pal" or "best friend" ... He is my (and our) Lord! But, I diverge. I replied referring to this life memoir from Paul: *"For me to live is Christ."* I broke it into three parts:

- (1) **"For me ..."** My faith is a deeply personal commitment I have made through a personal act of my will. It's mine, not my parents, not my culture, not my church, it's mine, it's personal, it's "for me." On one hand, it was an initial "once and for all" commitment, but on the other hand it is a commitment I need to repeatedly make through an act of my will countless times each day. There are a thousand and one personal decisions we face each and every day in the course of living, and just about each one calls *"for me"* to make a personal decision about how I am going ...
- (2) **"to live..."** This personal commitment involves how I am going to live; it involves every area of my life, every waking moment of my life, just about every decision of life throughout the course of my life, as to how I am going **to live** out my relationship with the Lord, Who ...
- (3) **"... is Christ."** This personal commitment which (1) I have made through an act of my will and (2) involves all of my life every moment of my life throughout my life is, at root, (3) a commitment to Jesus Christ, just as He is. I try to live every aspect of my life to follow, honor and please Him. Everything is to be done *"in remembrance of Him."* Not that I always succeed, but that is my aim.

This is a bit of an aside, but I went on to explain that though this may be a *personal* commitment, it is certainly not a *private* one. I'm sorry, but a privately held faith that is not public and open is no faith ... just as a privately made commitment to a spouse that is not also a public commitment open for all to see and know about is no marriage. Also, my commitment to Christ is not just a "personal" private matter because it is inextricably tied with my public commitment to His Body, the Church. As I tell the Confirmation classes each year, it's very much like marriage. Marriage is at root a promise, a lifelong commitment, to honor, love, obey, protect and cherish a specific person who animates a specific body no matter what happens to that body. The commitment is to the person who animates that body as well as to that person's body. And we commit in love and care to the WHOLE person *"... for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health."* The Bible calls the church the Bride of Christ; it also refers to the church as the Body of Christ. The church is that imperfect, flawed Body through which the spirit of Jesus is manifested. When we commit to Jesus Christ, we should simultaneously and publicly commit to an earthly manifestation of His Body, a church, or else our commitment is really no commitment, no relationship. Too many Christians take their commitment to the church far too lightly while professing to have a "relationship" with Christ! To be sure, we are committed first and foremost to the Person who animates the Body, but I believe we'll never discover the many deep rewards of committed, long-term faithfulness to the Person Who animates the body if we are not faithful TO the Body as well (*end of aside*).

Author and speaker Josh McDowell once wrote about visiting with a corporate executive who was asked, *"What's your purpose in life?"* The executive replied, without blinking an eye, *"My purpose is to go to heaven and take as many people with me as I can!"* I like that. *"My purpose is to go to heaven and take as many people with me as I can."* Basically, that was why that executive strove to excel in all areas of life, so that he would be an attractive force drawing as many people as possible to think about heavenly things. That's just another way of saying, *"For me to live is Christ."* As good Presbyterians, we might reply about our life's purpose by giving the answer from the Westminster Catechism: *"To Glorify God, and Enjoy Him Forever"* Which, again, it's just another way of saying, *"For me to live is Christ."* That's the six-word memoir that sums up how Paul lived. The second part of Paul's concise memoir: *"To die is gain"* is worthy of a sermon in itself, but will have to wait until another time, maybe Easter. It is, though, an integral part Paul's life memoir. Paul really believed he couldn't lose. If he lived, he could continue living a fulfilled, enjoyable and purpose-filled life with Christ; if he died, he knew he would be with Christ face to face and forever. It was a win/win! As someone has said, *"Life without Christ is a hopeless end. But with Christ, it's an endless hope."*

"For me, to live is Christ." May that be the six word memoir for each of us, may that be the six word memoir of our church, may that be the six word memoir of all the churches who share on this World Communion Sunday the communion of our Lord's Body and Blood, broken and shed that our lives may have real and driving purpose, and the sure and certain hope of eternal gain. May we live all our lives, every moment of our lives, in remembrance of Him. Amen.