

Treasured Words

A Sermon Preached by W. Dale Osborne using Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 119:9-16; John 12:20-33
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How many of you have seen the recently released blockbuster movie titled Black Panther? There are numerous impressive themes in this Marvel motion picture. The film's director, Ryan Coogler, deserves all the accolades that are being heaped upon him by movie critics and fans alike. My wife Suzy and I saw Black Panther this past Tuesday night. Our daughter had told us we just had to see it. We are so grateful that we obliged her as the movie delivered powerful characters, powerful relationship dynamics and powerful special effects. It also reiterated the positive impact that a predominately African American production can achieve. The screenplay lifted up women in a threefold capacity rarely seen in cinema. There was an inspiring scientific characterization of women, a proud and loyal warrior class of women and a deeply protective and matriarchal elegance in women. Suzy and I walked out of the theater treasuring the words of promise and prophetic wisdom we heard in the midst of serious conflict and historical horrors. I encourage you to see this movie if you can. Look for the words within it that you might treasure and draw in to yourself.

The title of my message today is Treasured Words. I want to think out loud with you as we ponder ancient and more current words that can be treasured. If you were with us last Sunday, you may remember Marcus reading the words of John 3:16 saying, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." A good number of you may have been encouraged to treasure those words as a young child. By the age of three my parents and Sunday School teachers had helped me memorize this captivating verse of scripture. I was encouraged to treasure them and abide with them over and over again. They eventually became words of extreme comfort in times of fear and anxiety. With age comes new understandings and adaptive reasoning, but these ancient words still hold a huge place of treasure in my storehouse of important words of my faith. I hope and trust that each one of you has some uniquely treasured and affirming words of God's grace in your memory banks.

I mentioned that parents and Sunday School teachers helped me learn those words as a three year old. Credit must also be given to my dear old great-grandfather. Papa McCarty was born around 1870 in rural Virginia. I came into his life and he into mine when he was around 88 years old. He died at the age of 94 when I was 6 years young. Papa McCarty was one generation removed from slaves on the family farm. He grew up knowing a lot about farming, hunting, religion and racism. When I was about four and Papa was about 92 I asked him how he could be so old. Matters of life and death were often on my mind, even at age 4. This was probably due to a night time prayer we said every night in my home. Do you remember hearing the words of this childhood prayer by your bedside, "Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake. I pray the Lord my soul to take." Yipes!, a bit daunting for a toddler or preschooler. Those words became a

treasure for me even if they caused me to think about death far too often as a child. Thus my question to Papa McCarty, “How come you are so old? How come you have lived so very long?” His hair was as white as the stiff white cotton in his Sunday dress shirts. When he fired his hunting shotgun at squirrels or dove he had to keep the butt near his hip due to arthritis. He was a marvel of age to a four year old boy with thoughts of both eternity and mortality in his brain. His reply has stayed in my head and heart since I was four. His reply has been a big part of the treasured words in my life. Papa McCarty answered me simply by saying, “I suppose I have lived so long because I read my Bible every day and I never hit my wife.” Wow, let those words sink in to your four or one hundred and four year old brains. “I suppose I have lived so long because I read my Bible every day and I never hit my wife.” Papa’s wife had died well before I was born but I had heard him speak lovingly of her. Since the concept of people as property had not been far removed from Papa’s upbringing, I suppose the practice of hitting a person or a spouse was quite prevalent and maybe even accepted practice in his day. It makes me shudder to think of such an ancient society where women and people of color were treated as property. But then I painfully remember it is still done today, right here in the southern part of heaven we call Chapel Hill. Domestic abuse, racially motivated hatred and physical violence, the subjugation of human beings because of their sexual orientation, the deportation and destruction of families because they lack the proper documentation – they all keep happening. They all keep lessening life and dehumanizing you, me and countless others.

Let’s see, don’t hit your spouse and read the Bible every day. I chose at age 4, to treasure those words. At the age of five, when reading came into my repertoire of God given skills, I started reading a lovely children’s bible that my church in Virginia had given me. By around 10 I proudly finished reading every book of that incredible book we call Holy. Having done so, and with a commitment to reading it every day, as well as the sure promise to myself that I would never hit my spouse (whenever I found one), I imagined that I could live to a ripe old age, maybe well into my nineties, just like Papa McCarty.

Now sometimes I wonder if I, and perhaps all of us treasure God’s Word and the words found in Genesis through Revelation as much as we should. I have to admit, there are so many words in the Bible that I know I don’t treasure all of them. Sometimes I even use the book of Numbers as a sleep aid. Right or wrong, those efforts at a census of the 12 tribes of Israel can put even the severest insomniac to sleep. The prophet Jeremiah speaks of God’s words, laws, covenant in the passage found on page one of our bulletin for today. In that passage from Chapter 31 we come face to face with Yahweh’s uncompromising, unconditional love for a troubled and divided people. This remarkable prophet used a metaphor that I take literally from time to time. He says, “I shall put my law within them and I will write my words upon their hearts.” It would be incredibly painful to have words inscribed on the human heart, but it would at least provide a surface that could only hold a few legible words. Jeremiah wants the people within earshot to understand that Yahweh’s covenant is meaningful. It

is worth remembering. It is worth treasuring. The laws of God are good for life. Maybe that's what Papa McCarty was trying to tell me by encouraging me to read the Bible every day.

How many words though, how many laws or commandments are useful for a long and well lived life? How many can fit on your heart. How many can be truly treasured and woven into a healthy human existence. Do you remember how Jesus answered in scripture when he was asked to speak of the most important commandment or guideline of God? There were so many in use and misuse at that time. At least 613 were contained in the Torah of the Hebrew people. They were explicit guidelines for human existence but they often became tools of oppression and social anxiety. So many commandments, so much to remember. Give me the greatest and most important said the Gospel inquirer. Tell me Rabbi. Tell me Jesus. What can my heart hold onto? Inscribe it upon me. The reply found in Matthew is "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

My Papa McCarty's wisdom was decent and brief but it does not rise to the stature of Jesus's proclamation in Matthew 22. The answer given by Jesus fits nicely on my heart. I pray it can for you as well. It will surely lead to further inquiry and further discernment on your part but it is a wonderful beginning point. It is a treasured word for all of us. From the ancient poet who wrote the words of Psalm 119 to the director who brought together a modern Marvel movie in 2018, these words ring true. These are words to be treasured and words to be shared. They stand in solidarity with the words of Jesus in our Gospel reading today. Jesus, after speaking of his death said to those who would listen, whether they be Jew or Gentile saying, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." May we too be drawn in. May we find the words to treasure in our brains and inscribe them on our hearts so that people will know God is acting through us. Listed in your bulletin are the names of five persons who have been living in sanctuary at various churches in our state. I wonder what words they are treasuring in the midst of their humble existence? I wonder what they are being drawn into as they sit and sleep and live in holy isolation. Love your neighbor as yourself. May it be so.