

“MARKING MILESTONES”

Today marks two milestones in the lives of most all of us. We have memorialized those loved ones who have gone before us, and we are celebrating those young people who have achieved the important milestone of graduating from High School. We typically ‘mark’ those milestones with decorating the graves of loved ones, attending memorial services, or as we have done today, spending time lighting candles and remembering those whose lives have touched us. We typically hear graduation speeches we’ll never remember, and share well wishes, and congratulations with excited and anxious graduates as they transition into “the real world”, (whatever that means).

As I prayerfully considered this message for this day, I was drawn to an event in the Old Testament that reminded me of a similar milestone in Israel’s history. They were remembering with great fondness the huge impact that Moses had on their history, and individual lives. His passing came with great sadness, like it does for all of us, and yet it came with great promise and anticipation embodied in Moses’ heir; the young Joshua. We might think of his new beginning as a graduation of sorts, as he assumes the role of new leader in Israel, and leads the whole nation into another “real world”; the Promised Land.

Listen to these verses given to Joshua describing this event:

“Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the instructions Moses gave you. Do not deviate from them, turning either to the right or the left. Then you will be successful in everything you do. Study this Book of Instruction continually. Meditate on it day and night so you will be sure to obey everything written in it. Only then will you prosper and succeed in all you do. This is my command – be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”
Joshua 1: 7-9

The focus on being strong and courageous cannot be missed, it’s stated 3 times in verses 6 – 9. Not a bad graduation speech for any of us, but not the whole story either.

Sandwiched in between the bookends; “Be Strong and Courageous” are two other points of instruction, lessons to be learned, words of wisdom, worldly advice. I want to focus for a few moments on those two other lessons; because each of them relates to one of the Milestones we Mark today:

1. TAKE A LESSON FROM THE DEAD

This principle obviously relates to our milestone experience of memorializing those loved ones who have died. In this passage, Joshua is exhorted by God to remember not just the life of Moses, but the lessons he taught, and the example he set. Joshua has been his understudy for many years, and we might assume he has learned much, but God wishes to remind him of two most important things during this most important transitional phase in Joshua’s young life.

It reminds me of the most poignant scene from the popular movie; Remember the Titans. Let me set up the scene and we’ll watch it together. Remember the Titans is a movie about a real football team which was struggling with race relations following the de-segregation laws of a few decades ago. The players are not getting along, nor are the new black head coach, and the old white head coach. The new coach gets the boys up early for a misty morning ‘jog’ and they end up on a civil war battlefield. Let’s watch:

Take a lesson from the Dead. The lighting of the candles this morning has afforded us the opportunity to be reminded of some of the experiences, maybe even some of the lessons we’ve all learned from those loved ones who have died. Here are the 2 lessons God wants Joshua to remember from his beloved mentor, Moses.

A -be careful to obey all Moses instructions

What an excellent reminder for all of us that Moses instructions, (which include the 10 commandments) are to be obeyed. It is not our prerogative to pick and choose which commands we’ll obey, and which we’ll overlook, though we all try that approach at times.

We must be careful to do the best we can, keeping the spirit of the law in mind as well as the letter of the law, as we seek to be obedient. It would also be helpful to keep in mind that though Moses is lifted up as a model of obedience, he too failed to keep all God's laws, and it cost him entrance to the Middle Eastern Promised Land. Should that make us hopeless, and give up? No, it should make us more resolute, knowing that we have a Savior who empowers us to resist temptation, and strive for obedience. Moses may have missed his earthly Holy Land, but I'm guessing he's at home in his Heavenly Holy Land.

If I had to identify the most important discipline necessary for an ordinary person to become an extraordinary disciple of Jesus; this would be it. We might never be the best Bible Scholar in the world, or the world's greatest prayer, or the churches top giver, but if we could each learn the fine art of being obedient...can you imagine where our lives would be?

B -don't deviate from them (Moses' instructions) to the right or to the left

This is not a political advertisement, aimed at enlisting independents to the political process, though I want to make a political statement. I am troubled and somewhat embarrassed about the Polarization of American Politics in this great country. We have become way too combative, and thus polarized, even marginalized in this country because of political and media extremists on each end of the political spectrum. We have had the same issue in theological circles for years between liberals and conservatives. It's time to get over it, and get back to work!

It might be a misrepresentation of this verse to claim it applies to anything political, or maybe even theological, but I think God is imploring Joshua to find a way to live in the moderate middle. Our former Bishop Mike Coyner used to say that 'United Methodism has 10% of our people on the far left, and 10% of our people on the far right, and 80% of our people in the moderate middle'.

I think he is right. I confess I am farther right than the majority of United Methodists, but I believe there is room in our body for differences of opinion, theology, and practice. However, I don't believe there is room for negotiation on the essentials of our Christian Faith and Wesleyan Heritage! We must not deviate from the Authority of the Holy Scriptures, the Divine Lordship of Jesus Christ, the personal need for human salvation, and the empowering work of the Holy Spirit. Let's consider the second advice:

2. BE LIFE LONG LEARNERS

If asked to define the second most important discipline, next to obedience, this might make my list, certainly my top 5. Be a life long learner. When we stop learning, we stop growing, when we stop growing we start dying. When we stop learning and growing...intentionally...we're already dead!

Joshua was a good student. He watched and learned from one of the best in the whole of human history. Certainly the one who confronted the evil Pharaoh, led Israel through the most important event in their history was a good teacher, but Joshua had to learn his own lessons, make his own mistakes (which he did) and lead his own disgruntled band of followers into the Promised Land. His education carried on, and carried him throughout his life.

People who want to follow Jesus, must continually be learning what that means. We can't learn that completely at the knee of our fathers or mothers, no matter how holy and righteous they are. We can't expect that graduating from High School means learning is over. We must learn on our own, and we must make it a daily, life long habit. We can't learn all we need to know to be effective disciples in Church, even from the best pastor or teachers in the world. We can't learn all that it means to be a Christian from the radio, or TV, or even from books, though all those things are helpful.

Learning to be effective; must be personal, and it must be put into practice. The best way to learn something is to teach it, am I right? God implores Joshua to be a lifelong learner, and gives him two examples to guide him:

A -study this book continually; meditate on it day and night

This injunction is an obvious encouragement (command even) to spend independent time with God's Word, so that it might take root in our souls and lives. I know that when my life gets out of focus, or when stress gets me down, the first place I have to return is back to God's Word. I'm continually amazed how God speaks to me, and ministers to my soul, (no matter my need), through His Holy Word.

B -so you will be able to obey everything written in it

There is no secret here, but I must remind us, being obedient is made easier if we stay connected to God, through the one Book he has ordained to guide our lives.

In conclusion, I want to address the two verses I've failed to mention. There are two promises in the middle of these admonitions to be strong and courageous; to learn the lessons from the dead, and becoming life long learners. If we do those two things, we'll prosper and be successful. I'm sure that meant something different for Joshua than it does for us, and I know it meant something different for Jesus than it does for us. It has little to do with financial gain, or personal power, or fleeting fame, and everything to do with a deepening faith, a more sensitive spirit, a more gracious outlook, a more positive attitude, a more humble personality, and a more fulfilling life.

Today we mark our milestones with diplomas and tombstones, but in eternity we'll mark them with lives well lived. Let those of us closer to the grave than graduation become the Moses' all young Joshua's need. Amen

Do not be afraid or Discouraged – For the Lord your God is with you.

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1. TAKE A LESSON FROM THE _____

A -be careful to obey _____ Moses instructions

B -don't _____ from them to the right or to the left

2. BE LIFE LONG _____

A -study this book _____; meditate on it day and night

B -so you will be able to obey _____ written in it