



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“KNOWING WHEN TO SAY NO?”

Scripture Lessons: Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 9:1-2, 9-16; Luke 4:1-13

*This sermon was preached by Dr. Joseph S. Harvard III on Sunday, February 14, 2016
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Gracious God, as we enter this Lenten journey, we ask for your presence, for your guidance, for we often forget who we are and whose we are. We come here to be reminded that we are your children, created and claimed by you. Let your word be a light to our path and a lamp to our feet so that we may faithfully follow Christ our Lord, in whose name we offer this prayer. Amen.

In his autobiography, the actor Kirk Douglas, father of Michael Douglas, tells about an experience he had several years ago. At the time, he was already a well-known Hollywood star. He was driving alone along the California coast when he saw a young man in a naval uniform hitchhiking beside the road. He pulled over and gave him a ride. He did not tell the young man who he was, but the young man recognized him immediately.

Kirk Douglas asked the young sailor where he was stationed, where he was headed, and what he planned to do with his life. After a while, the young sailor could take it no longer, and he blurted out, “Mister, don’t you know who you are?”

Don’t you know who you are? It is the question before us on this first Sunday of Lent. The Lenten season is about retelling the stories of our faith, particularly the stories of our Lord—his teachings, his ministry on the way to Jerusalem, his passion. It is our tradition that reminds us who and whose we are. There is more to our identity than our name. Our identity is about what has shaped us and gives direction and purpose to our lives. Telling stories—the stories of faith—reminds us who and whose we are.

We learn some of that from our ancestors. Moses believed that remembering where they had been and how they had come into the land God promised to them would help to keep God’s people faithful. So when they were bringing the first fruits of the harvest as an offering, he said, “You say this before the Lord your God: ‘A wandering Aramean was my ancestor. He went down to Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and then he became a great nation, mighty and populous. And when his Egyptian captors were harsh on him, he cried out to God and God heard his cry and delivered him and brought us out of bondage.’” The story is an affirmation of faith, a community story that cast their thanksgiving into a frame that provided boundaries and purpose to their lives. It was said, “Tell it again and again, so we will always remember who and whose we are.”

Don’t you know who you are? Jesus had to answer that question in his temptation with the devil out in the wilderness for 40 days. The devil is sly. You notice the devil doesn’t ask Jesus to do something bad. There are no bad deeds suggested here. The devil simply challenges his identity. Jesus had been called to live out a story of service for others out of love for God. “I am among you as one who serves,” he was to say later, in Luke’s Gospel.

Jesus had not eaten for forty days. The text says he is famished. He is in the wilderness. He is hungry. Forty days is a long time not to eat. The idea of bread sounded good.

We spend a lot of our time working for bread, don't we? What is more necessary and essential for life than something to eat? "I'm working to put bread on the table," we often say. Bread can become a symbolism for money. We live in a very affluent society, although there are pockets of deep poverty around us. Despite our economic downturn, we as Americans have a lot of bread, a lot more bread than other people in the world. We crave bread.

Craig Dykstra, in his book, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices*, said, "There is in the Christian churches, and in the United States as a whole, a profound spiritual hunger for something... We would like to be sure that what we are doing—as people, as citizens, as families, as a nation—is right and good, but deep down we are not at all sure that it is."^[1] People today... are hungry—hungry for the bread that truly satisfies, hungry for an authentic encounter with God and for a life shaped by that encounter."^[2] The hunger deep in all of our souls is fed by the love of the living Christ."^[3]

Wouldn't it be good during this Lenten season to live into Lent by having the deep hunger within us not fed by things but fed by the love of God made known to us in Jesus Christ and by spreading that love out to our neighbors in ways that can be helpful and can provide hope? Jesus said, "No. I'm not going to turn the stone into bread. We do not live by bread alone." There is a deeper or more profound sense of who we are than simply the material.

Then Satan takes Jesus up to the top of the mountain and says, "I can make all these kingdoms yours." Jesus is offered power—power over all the kingdoms of the world. Satan has much power to offer. Why wouldn't Jesus accept it? The only power that mattered to Jesus was the power that was at work in his life. He resisted that temptation and then he was asked to worship Satan. Again he resisted. Jesus knew in the depth of his being who and whose he was. He kept quoting scripture..."As it is written..."

Jesus says no to Satan.

You know that saying, "Just say no." Something about that bothers me. Saying no is not easy. You can only say no when you know who and whose you are—when you know that your father was a wandering Aramean, that you are a child of God, created in God's image—that is what defines you, not your possessions, your power, or even your religion. Your relationship with God is what makes you, what sustains you, what guides you.

Do you remember the story about Hugh Thompson? On March 16, 1968, Thompson was a young helicopter pilot flying on patrol over the countryside of Vietnam. When he and his crew flew over the village of My Lai, they saw a nightmare taking place below. United States army troops in Charlie Company, under the constant pressure of danger and the madness of war, had lost control of their discipline, reason and humanity, and had begun slaughtering unarmed civilians in the village, most of them women, children and elderly men. Five hundred and four people had already been killed. Thompson set his helicopter down between the troops and the remaining villagers. At great risk to himself, he got out of the helicopter and confronted the officer in

^[1] Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices*, Second Edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), p. 3

^[2] Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices*, Second Edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), p. 17

^[3] Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices*, Second Edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), p. 13

charge. He then airlifted the few villagers still alive out of My Lai and radioed a report of the scene that resulted in a halt to the action, thus saving thousands of civilian lives.

All of this went unnoticed, even scorned in some quarters, until finally Hugh Thompson's actions were recognized. He was awarded an honorary doctorate by Emory University in Atlanta. One day standing on the platform at the University's commencement, Thompson was given the microphone, and he spoke to the question on everyone's mind: How could he have found the moral courage and the strength to do what he did that day? He gave the audience of graduates an answer that shocked them and brought them to a thoughtful silence.

"I'd like to thank my mother and father for trying to instill in me the difference between right and wrong," he began. "We didn't have much. I was born and raised in Stone Mountain, Georgia, and we had very little, but one thing we did have was the Golden Rule. My parents taught me early, 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.' That's why I did what I did that day. It's hard to put certain things into words. You graduates are going to have to make decisions in your life. Please make the right decisions, because we're depending on you. God bless you all."

You are a child of God, created and claimed by the Creator of heaven and earth. You have been claimed and redeemed so that you can live out your life by faith.

In this city, when nine people were shot at a Bible study, forgiveness was offered. It was a game changer. The whole world paused and was silent. "Forgive us as we forgive those who have trespassed against us," the voice reminding us who and whose we are. If you are a child of God, live out of that identity.

Friends, one of my favorite hymns is a hymn we'll sing at the end of this service: *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*. There is a line that strikes me every time I sing it:

*The prince of darkness grim,
We tremble not for him...
One little word shall fell him.*^[10]

What is that one little word? I've always assumed that one little word was Jesus. Isn't that the answer to all religious questions? But now I wonder if the little word that has the power to defeat Satan may not even be simply "no."

Let it be so. Amen.

^[10] Martin Luther, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 260.