

"Ben Franklin Meets Jesus"

A meditation based on Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23;

Psalm 125; and Mark 7:24-37

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Redlands United Church of Christ

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Some time during the decade of the 1920s, at least according to the legends of the literary world, famous author Ernest Hemingway walked into a bar and sat down with a friend. As the evening progressed, the friend challenged Hemingway to write a complete story in only six words. Hemingway took the friend's bait, betting him \$10 that he could do it. Within a few minutes, Hemingway had written these six words: "For sale: baby shoes, never worn." Legend has it that Hemingway won the bet, and that he considered this little novel his best work!

About three years ago, following in the footsteps of Hemingway, the editors of an online magazine offered the same challenge to their readers—an invitation to write six-word memoirs of their own. The results included over 15,000 entries from around the country, several hundred of which were collected into a book published last year entitled, *Not Quite What I Was Planning: Six-Word Memoirs by Writers Famous and Obscure*. The publisher calls these stories "fascinating, hilarious, shocking, and moving." Here are a few of the stories, each one complete in just six words:

- Adopted baby. Got pregnant. Instant family.
- One tooth, one cavity, life's cruel.
- Seventy years, few tears, hairy ears.
- Born in the desert, still thirsty.

- Cursed with cancer. Blessed with friends. (from a 9-year old thyroid cancer survivor)
- and a delightful pun from the son of Deepak Chopra: Soul'd out so I could prophet...
- Finally, from comedian Stephen Colbert: Well, I thought it was funny.

One of the editors, Larry Smith, wrote, "There's really a lot going on in this little book...It's fun...but it's intense...all the emotions we feel year-to-year, day-to-day...the whole human drama is in here—six words [at a time]."

Brevity is "in" at least among some in our day. Twitter—an online social networking site—allows text messages (called tweets) of up to 140 characters. Popular poetry styles include "haiku"—a poem of only seventeen syllables, written in three lines of five, seven, and five syllables each. On a women clergy retreat several months ago, we wordsmiths were invited to condense several scriptural passages into this 17 syllable format, and the results were inspiring, partially because of their enforced brevity.

The art of brevity and wisdom combined is not new in our nation's history. One of our founders, Benjamin Franklin, was well-known for his pithy aphorisms, many of which were collected and published over a span of 25 years in his annual *Poor Richard's Almanack*. We have heard them so often ourselves:

- Eat to live, and not live to eat.
- Three may keep a secret, if two of them are dead.
- Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.
- Tis easy to see, hard to foresee.
- He that lieth down with dogs, shall rise up with fleas.
- A good example is the best sermon.
- And one that many people assume is found in scripture, but is actually from the pen of Dr. Franklin: God helps them that help themselves.

Yet, if we travel back in history even further, to scripture itself, we also find the truth in sound bites. A few pithy sayings from today's Hebrew Scripture readings, include:

- A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches
- Favor is better than silver or gold.
- The rich and the poor have this in common: God made them all.
- Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity.
- The rod of anger will fail.
- Those who are generous are blessed.
- Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion
- As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so God surrounds the people.

One of the strongest and clearest messages communicated in these ancient sound bites seems to be that wealth and poverty ought to be evened out, because, after all, we are all sons and daughters of One God. The Proverbs reading thus brings a prophetic word to the whole community of faith about our treatment of the poor. It is a sweeping reminder that God is the God of both the privileged and the poor, that God insists on an end to economic oppression, and that God calls us to grateful generosity. The entire cycle of poverty and its eradication is simplistically noted for us herein. God's social welfare plan in just a few words: Poor and wealthy share the same Creator; Poverty is injustice personified; Share your food with the poor. Yes, it is a few more than six words, yet it is also a complete story of our mission and purpose as a congregation of love and compassion.

In the Gospel reading, we find Jesus himself engaged in the fine art of weaving wisdom with brevity. Quoting a saying of his day, he says to a Gentile woman daring to ask for his help, "Let the children first be fed, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." In other words—in words uncomfortably laced with the bigotries of Jesus' day and

from which he was apparently not immune—let the Jews, God’s chosen, first be served at the table...for you, woman, as a Gentile, are a dog in God’s eyes. To which this woman of obvious financial means boldly retorts, “Yes; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Her courageous response—her story of God’s justice, spoken in just a few words—seems to capture the attention of Jesus, who replies, “For this saying you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter.” When this same story is recorded years later in the gospel according to Matthew, the account has Jesus speaking of her faith, which raises the question of how could a pagan woman have faith in an itinerant preacher from a foreign religion? Hope, perhaps, but faith? What does she really know of his teachings, of his person, beyond the rumors of healings and other wonders? Perhaps, in seeking a motivating force, we’re closer to the truth if we focus on her passionate love for her child, a love that would not be discouraged or deterred even by insult or rejection. And deep down, if we read the story closely and try to imagine what’s going through her mind, we don’t find it so hard to relate to her, no matter how different she may seem to us. Those of us who are mothers or fathers can imagine her thoughts, her possible six-word statement of faith: “He heals...my baby...I believe.”

Later in the same passage, Jesus is returning to his own land, but pauses to heal one more Gentile, a man born deaf. In this story, it is Jesus who tersely comments while touching the man’s ears, “Be opened.”

These two healing stories are set within the early chapters of Mark’s gospel, in which Jesus moves back and forth between Jewish and Gentile territory. This passage is itself situated between two stories of miraculous feedings, one on Jewish territory (chapter 6) and the other on Gentile soil (chapter 8).

In the broader view, then, this passage from Mark is a story about who has access to the table. The story presents Jesus expressing his faith tradition’s position on Gentiles (and

especially on a woman, with a demon-possessed daughter, or a man born unable to hear a word and thus ritually unclean). Put simply, Gentiles could not share the table with Jews. This is the implication of the statement Jesus makes to the woman, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Jesus is challenged to move beyond what he had been taught, and to include at the table those who had been understood as outside God's love and care. The question of inclusivity faced by the early church, and addressed by this passage from Mark, can be paraphrased in the imagery of Proverbs 22: The Gentiles are at the gate. Are we going to let them in?

Looking closely at today's passages, it would seem that, unlike preachers through the ages, the characters in scripture often use an economy of words to get the point across. Here in the United Church of Christ, we have a few incisive sayings of our own:

- God is still speaking
- Never place a period where God has placed a comma
- Wherever you are on the journey...you're welcome here

In characteristic uniqueness, Redlands United Church of Christ has condensed the message of the broader denomination into crisp and clear one-word truths expressing our purpose and our ethos:

- journey
- pilgrimage
- compassion
- covenant
- justice
- peace

Today's scripture passages, with their inspiring brevity, invite each of us to ponder our own one-word statement of purpose...our brief haiku poem of faith...our six-word life narrative.

Before Kirsten Mebust became a professor of religion, and before her daughter, Anna, was the Berkeley Ph.D. student in atmospheric chemistry she is today, the two of them—mother and daughter—were sitting at their breakfast table. Daughter Anna was four years old. She dallied over breakfast that morning, studying her glass of orange juice. Young Anna gazed down into the liquid, then lifted the glass and peered at the bottom. “Mama,” she called out, “If God is everywhere, is God in my orange juice?” Ah, theology before 8am...every parent's nightmare! “Well, Anna, ummm...I guess so,” came the tentative reply from this mother who had not yet gone to seminary in order to answer her four-year-old's questions. After all, mother Kirsten justified to herself, didn't Psalm 139 name God's presence even in the depths of the sea? Why not orange juice? “A grin spread across Anna's face,” recalls her mother. “[Anna] lifted the glass and tipped her head back. She smacked her lips and banged the glass back down on the table, crowing, ‘I drank up God!’”

What is your one or four or six word life story? What is your faith tweet—140 characters, no more—what is your haiku of 17 syllables, your six-word story of faith? As we come to this table today, let us remember the brief, inclusive invitation of the one we seek to follow: “Take, Eat, Come, Drink, Give Thanks.”

Amen and Blessed Be