

# A Six Word Life MEMOIR

Sermon, August 21, 2011

Text: Philippians 1:15-27a

Near the Clark family plot in the Brandywine 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, but she was a thorough and proud professional who took her vocation seriously, a no-nonsense instructor who nevertheless always seemed to have a bit of a twinkle in her eye. While visiting my wife's grave a few years back, I walked around the cemetery a bit and happened upon Miss Lewis' headstone. Under her name it reads: "Died: 1993. Born: Mind Your Own Business."

As you know, an epitaph is a brief statement commemorating or epitomizing a deceased person, usually as an inscription on a grave marker which, in a few succinct words, seeks to capture something of the essence of the deceased. Some can be quite amusing. On a 1880 grave in Nantucket, MA it reads: *"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."* In a Thurmont, MD, cemetery a headstone reads: *"Here lies an Atheist. All dressed up, And no place to go."* In the Boot Hill Cemetery of Tombstone, Arizona: *"Here lies Lester Moore, Four slugs from a forty-four, No Les, No More."* In a Ruidoso, NM, cemetery we have: *"Here lies Johnny Yeast. 'Pardon me for not rising.'"* The headstone of Harry Edsel Smith of Albany, New York, reads, *"Born 1903 - Died 1942. Looked up the elevator shaft to see if the car was on the way down. It was."* In Uniontown, PA: *"Here lies the body of Jonathan Blake, Stepped on the gas Instead of the brake."* A widow wrote this epitaph in a 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, three six word epitaphs: One in a Cripple Creek, Colorado, cemetery reads, *"He called \*\*Bill Smith \*\*A Liar."* A never-married woman's epitaph in Scranton, PA: *"No hits, no runs, no heirs."* Finally, my favorite, again from an Atlanta, Georgia cemetery: *"I Told You I Was Sick."*

You can write a pretty interesting story with just six words!

Once asked to write a full story in six words, legend has it that novelist Ernest Hemingway responded with a poignant tale: "For Sale: Baby shoes, never worn." It would be difficult to tell a heart-breaking story more succinctly than that (*Why have baby shoes that have never been used? The answer tells the story*). 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, at last count *Smith Magazine* compiled four books! The title of the premiere book was six words: Not Quite What I Was Planning, and was subtitled, *"Six-Word Memoirs by Famous and Obscure Writers."* The tiny memoirs are sometimes sad, often funny, and, of course, always concise. Author Joyce Carol Oates submitted these six words: *"Revenge is living well without you."* Singer Aimee Mann summed up her life like this: *"Couldn't cope, so I wrote songs."* This one from a 27-year-old man after a divorce he didn't want: *"I still make coffee for two."* And this one? *"70 years, few tears, hairy ears."* This last sample is especially poignant: *"Cursed with cancer. Blessed with friends."*

If you had to sum up your life in just six words, what would you write? In today's reading, Paul is writing to the church at Philippi from a prison cell. He wants the Philippians to know what has happened to him; and he also wants them to know his imprisonment hasn't really hindered his ministry. Even in jail, Paul's steadfast witness is winning converts. Still, he knows his situation is precarious. He knows he could be facing martyrdom and begins to ponder what this might mean. Paraphrased, his conclusion can be summed in six words: *"Whatever happens, it's a win/win!"* He actually sums it up in a ten word memoir: *"For me to live is Christ, to die is gain."* The first part of that, though, 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 completely and 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 one 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.

'Way back when I was interviewing for churches, 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 what I believe is 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 ... what I went on to write was kinder than what I was thinking I should write. I wrote, *"If I may quote Paul slightly out of context, I refer to Philippians 1:21."*

(1) **"For me ..."** My faith is a deeply personal commitment I have made through a personal act of my will. To be sure, it was an initial "once and for all" commitment, but it is a commitment I repeatedly make through an

act of my will countless times each day. There are a thousand and one decisions we all face each and every day in the course of living, and just about each one calls for a response of faith, which brings me to

- (2) **"... to live..."** This personal commitment involves how I live; it involves every area of my life, every waking moment of my life, throughout the course of my life.
- (3) **"...is Christ."** This personal commitment which I have made through an act of my will and which involves all of my life every moment of my life throughout my life is, at root, a commitment to Jesus Christ. I try to live every aspect of my life to follow, honor and please 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 commitment. 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 personal commitment, to honor, love, obey, protect and cherish a specific person. More to the point, it is a commitment to a person who animates a specific body no matter what happens to that body. To be sure, the commitment is not just to the body of that person. The commitment is to the person who animates that body, *but it is also to the body inhabited by that beloved person*. It is through that person's body we encounter the person. And we commit to the person and the body of that person *"... for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health."* It's no trivial matter that 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 personally commit to Jesus Christ, we should simultaneously and publicly commit to an earthly manifestation of His Body, as well, or else our commitment is really no commitment. Too many Christians take their commitment to the church far too lightly! We are committed first and foremost to the Person who animates the Body, to be sure, 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 an executive recruiter, a head-hunter, who seeks new corporate executives for companies. The man told McDowell, *"When I get an executive who I'm trying to hire for someone else, I like to disarm him. I offer him a drink, take my coat off, loosen my tie, throw up my feet and talk about baseball, football, family, whatever, until he's all relaxed. Then, when I think I've got him relaxed, I lean over, look him square in the eye and say, 'What's your purpose in life?' It's amazing how top executives just fall apart at that question."* And then he tries to get that executive to see he may have better chances and more opportunities of fulfillment at the company he's recruiting for. *"Well," he continued, "I was interviewing this fellow the other day, had him all disarmed, with my feet up on his desk, talking about football. Then I leaned in and said, 'What's your purpose in life, Bob?' And Bob replied, without blinking an eye, 'My purpose is to go to heaven and take as many people with me as I can.' For the first time in my career," said this head-hunter, "I was speechless."*

I like that. *"My purpose is to go to heaven and take as many people with me as I can."* That's just another way of saying, *"For me to live is Christ."* You and I might use different language, but could we state our life purpose that succinctly and would it contain a reference to our faith? As good Presbyterians, we might give the summary given in the Westminster Catechism as the chief end of man: *"To Glorify God, and Enjoy Him Forever"* 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. What do some people have in its place? *"For me to live is work."* *"For me to live is family."* *"For me to live is to be entertained."* Or, now that the NFL season is starting, *"For me to live is football."* And certainly many of these are important. But the truth is there are many people with good jobs, nice families and fun hobbies, but when they come to the end of the day they realize none of it is really enough to fulfill, to satisfy their deepest hunger. I once read of Ralph Barton, an outstanding cartoonist in the 30's, a man who discovered fame and fortune were not enough. He left this note pinned to his pillow before putting a bullet through his head: *"I have had few difficulties, many friends, great successes; I have gone from wife to wife, from house to house, visited great countries of the world, but I am fed up with inventing devices to fill up twenty-four hours of the day."* As someone has said, *"Life without Christ is a hopeless end. But with Christ, it's an endless hope."*

*"To live is Christ,"* says Paul. 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 of Paul's life memoir. Paul really believed he couldn't lose. If he lived, he could continue sharing his faith in Christ and 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! I conclude with a story that is told about the great evangelist Dwight Moody. He was traveling by boat on Lake Michigan when a really bad storm developed. The other passengers on the boat were terrified; they even started an impromptu prayer meeting asking God to deliver them from the storm. Moody didn't join in this prayer meeting. When asked why not, he answered, *"I have a sister in Chicago and I have a sister in heaven ... I love them both, and I really don't care which I see tonight."* That, again, is another way of echoing Paul, *"For me to live is Christ ... I love living with Him in my life this side of heaven. However, to die is gain ... for then I'll be with him forever."*

If you were to sum up your life in a six word memoir, how would it read? I hope we can all say along with the apostle Paul, *"For me, to live is Christ."* Amen.