

Joshua 24:14-15
October 30, '11

"BIOGRAPHY AS THEOLOGY: JOHN KNOX"

(Before scripture)

TODAY IS THE SECOND OF A TWO-PART SERIES WE'VE LABELLED "BIOGRAPHY AS THEOLOGY."

LAST WEEK I TOLD YOU THAT THE IDEA FOR SUCH A SERIES COMES FROM TWO BOOKS THAT I'VE ALWAYS FOUND FASCINATING.

HERE THEY ARE – THE WORD OF GOD ACROSS THE AGES AND BIOGRAPHY AS THEOLOGY.

I SUGGESTED THAT THE GENERAL THEME OF BOTH BOOKS IS "YOU CAN LEARN A GREAT DEAL ABOUT WHAT SOMEONE BELIEVES BY LOOKING AT THE WAY THAT PERSON LIVES THEIR LIFE."

THE INDIVIDUAL ON WHOM WE'LL FOCUS THIS MORNING IS A PERFECT EXAMPLE OF THE TRUTH OF THAT STATEMENT AND, THIS BEING REFORMATION SUNDAY, IT'S A PERFECT TIME TO DO SO.

WHILE THERE ARE MANY PASSAGES OF SCRIPTURE THAT MIGHT BE APPROPRIATE FOR TODAY, I THINK THE MOST WELL-KNOWN VERSES FROM THE BOOK OF JOSHUA ARE ONES THAT WORK BEST.

OUR SCRIPTURE READING THIS MORNING IS JOSHUA 24:14-15.

(After scripture)

ABOARD A FRENCH SHIP IN THE MID-16TH CENTURY WERE 120 GALLEY SLAVES WHO HAD BEEN CAPTURED AT THE CASTLE OF ST. ANDREW'S IN SCOTLAND.

THEY WERE CHAINED TO A ROWING BENCH 24 HOURS A DAY.

THEIR DAILY RATION OF FOOD WAS A BISCUIT & WATER – AS LITTLE AS 3 OUNCES OF FOOD PER DAY.

EVERY 3 WEEKS THEY WERE GIVEN A BIT OF VEGETABLE SOUP.

THIS CAPTIVITY LASTED 19 MONTHS.

THE GALLEY SLAVES WERE MEMBERS OF THE NEW PROTESTANT MOVEMENT SWEEPING ACROSS EUROPE & AT ONE POINT DURING THEIR CONFINEMENT, A PRIEST PRESENTED THE SLAVES WITH A PAINTED IMAGE OF THE VIRGIN MARY TO KISS.

ONE OF THE SLAVES BEGGED TO BE EXCUSED, SAYING, "*TROUBLE ME NOT. SUCH AN IDOL IS ACCURSED & I WILL NOT TOUCH IT.*"

THE IMAGE WAS FORCED INTO THE SLAVE'S HANDS & PUSHED TO HIS FACE.

THE GALLEY SLAVE TOOK HOLD OF IT, TOSSED IT INTO THE SEA AND SAID, "*LET OUR LADY NOW SAVE HERSELF. SHE IS LIGHT ENOUGH – LET HER LEARN TO SWIM.*"

THAT COURAGEOUS & BELLIGERENT GALLEY SLAVE WAS NONE OTHER THAN JOHN KNOX, THE MAN PERHAPS MOST RESPONSIBLE FOR THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH THAT WE KNOW TODAY.

THIS IS JUST ONE OF THE MANY STORIES ABOUT JOHN KNOX THAT MAKE HIM ONE OF THE MOST COLORFUL INDIVIDUALS IN THE HISTORY OF SCOTLAND, THE 16TH CENTURY REFORMATION AND ARGUABLY ONE OF THE MOST COLORFUL & ENIGMATIC CHARACTERS IN HISTORY.

THOUGH HE IS SO MUCH A PART OF OUR PRESBYTERIAN HERITAGE, I IMAGINE MOST OF YOU KNOW VERY LITTLE – IF ANYTHING – ABOUT HIM.

I THINK ONE OF THE REASONS FOR THAT MAY BE THAT THERE'S A LOT WITHIN THE LIFE OF JOHN KNOX THAT WOULD MAKE MOST OF US CRINGE & PERHAPS EVEN BE HESITANT TO CLAIM HIM AS THE FOUNDER OF OUR PARTICULAR BRAND OF CHRISTIAN FAITH.

HE WAS BORN IN SCOTLAND IN 1514 - THREE YEARS BEFORE LUTHER NAILED HIS 95 THESES TO THE DOOR OF THE CHURCH IN WITTENBERG, GERMANY – AN ACT THAT STARTED THE ENTIRE REFORMATION MOVEMENT.

KNOX WAS ORDAINED A ROMAN CATHOLIC PRIEST BUT CAME UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF GEORGE WISHART WHO WAS ONE OF THE LEADERS OF THE PROTESTANT MOVEMENT IN SCOTLAND.

KNOX SERVED AS A BODYGUARD FOR WISHART BUT, EVEN BRANDISHING A SWORD, HE WASN'T ABLE TO PREVENT WISHART'S ARREST IN 1545.

KNOX WAS PREPARED TO FOLLOW HIM INTO CAPTIVITY BUT WISHART PERSUADED HIM NOT TO, SAYING, *“ONE IS SUFFICIENT FOR A SACRIFICE.”*

WISHART WAS PROSECUTED & THREE MONTHS LATER, BURNED AT THE STAKE.

FOR THE NEXT QUARTER OF A CENTURY, JOHN KNOX FOUND HIMSELF TRAVELING BETWEEN SCOTLAND, ENGLAND, GERMANY & SWITZERLAND, ALWAYS AT THE FOREFRONT OF THE PROTESTANT MOVEMENT.

ALONG WITH THREE OTHERS, KNOX WAS GIVEN THE RESPONSIBILITY OF WRITING A STATEMENT OF FAITH FOR THE NEW PROTESTANT CHURCH IN SCOTLAND & IN A PERIOD OF JUST FOUR DAYS, THEY COMPOSED *“THE SCOTS CONFESSION,”* ONE OF THE CREEDS & CONFESSIONS OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (USA).

HIS CONFRONTATIONS & DEBATES WITH MARY, QUEEN OF SCOTS, ARE LEGENDARY.

SHE IS REPUTED TO HAVE SAID OF HIM, *“I FEAR THE PRAYERS OF JOHN KNOX MORE THAN ALL THE ASSEMBLED ARMIES OF EUROPE.”*

HE SPENT A GREAT DEAL OF TIME IN GENEVA WITH JOHN CALVIN, LEARNING FROM THE MAN WHO, MORE THAN ANYONE ELSE – INCLUDING MARTIN LUTHER – WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE THEOLOGY OF THE PROTESTANT MOVEMENT.

UPON THE DEATH OF JOHN KNOX, THE ONE LEADING THE FUNERAL SERVICE SAID, *“HERE LIES A MAN WHO IN HIS LIFE NEVER FEARED THE FACE OF MAN, WHO HAS BEEN OFTEN THREATENED WITH DAGGER, BUT YET HAS ENDED HIS DAYS IN PEACE & HONOR.”*

IT WAS ALSO SAID OF HIM, THOUGH, THAT *“HE SAW HIMSELF AS A HEAVEN-SENT PREACHER, WHEREAS IN FACT, HE WAS A BOLD EARTHLY REVOLUTIONARY, WHO OPENLY PREACHED VIOLENCE, AND NOTORIOUSLY CONSIDERED THE DEATH OF AN UNJUST RULER ABSOLUTELY JUSTIFIED.”*

JOHN KNOX WAS, INDEED, AN ENIGMA.

IF HE WERE LIVING TODAY, IT'S HARD TO SAY WHERE JOHN KNOX WOULD STAND ON POLITICAL, SOCIAL & THEOLOGICAL ISSUES THAT FACE US.

THE SEPARATION OF CHURCH & STATE WASN'T SOMETHING THAT WOULD EVER HAVE ENTERED HIS MIND & I THINK THERE'S A GOOD CHANCE THAT HE WOULD BE PART OF EITHER THE TEA PARTY MOVEMENT OR THE OCCUPY WALL STREET MOVEMENT.

I THINK THERE'S AN EVEN GREATER CHANCE, THOUGH, THAT HE WOULD SAVAGELY DISMISS THEM BOTH & SAY, "YOU'RE ALL IDIOTS & IN VIOLATION OF GOD'S LAWS & GOD'S WAYS."

HE WOULD ALSO PROBABLY NOT BE QUITE SO KIND IN HIS ASSESSMENT!

KNOX WAS A STRONG ADVOCATE OF A NATIONAL SYSTEM OF EDUCATION FOR EVERY YOUNG PERSON.

HE SPOKE OUT STRONGLY AGAINST GOVERNMENT'S TREATMENT OF THE POOR.

HE MINCED NO WORDS WHEN IT CAME TO THE CHURCH & ITS VIOLATION OF BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES OF JUSTICE & RIGHTEOUSNESS.

JOHN KNOX WAS A GIANT OF THE REFORMATION – A MAN WHOSE INFLUENCE HAS LASTED MORE THAN 500 YEARS.

WHAT LESSONS MIGHT WE LEARN FROM THE LIFE OF JOHN KNOX?

IF "BIOGRAPHY AS THEOLOGY" MEANS THAT YOU CAN LEARN WHAT SOMEONE BELIEVES BY HOW THEY LIVE THEIR LIFE, WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE LIFE OF JOHN KNOX?

THERE ARE TWO MAXIMS THAT COME TO MIND WHEN I CONSIDER THIS QUESTION – THE FIRST IS SOMETHING I LEARNED IN SEMINARY & THE OTHER IS SOMETHING I LEARNED SOMEWHERE ALONG LIFE'S JOURNEY, BUT I'M NOT SURE WHERE.

FIRST OF ALL, THE MAXIM FROM SEMINARY.

I'LL NEVER FORGET THE DAY IN MY FIRST SEMESTER IN SEMINARY THAT DR. HAROLD NEBELSICK, IN AN INTRODUCTORY COURSE IN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY, SAID, "*SOMETIMES, IN ORDER TO KEEP THE TRADITION, YOU HAVE TO CHANGE IT.*"

IT WAS ONE OF THE MOST BIZARRE THINGS I'D EVER HEARD!

I'M SURE THAT SOMEWHERE, I STILL HAVE THE NOTEBOOK FROM THAT DAY IN CLASS WHEN I FIRST HEARD THOSE WORDS.

THAT STATEMENT OPENED UP A WHOLE NEW WORLD FOR ME.

IT'S REALLY JUST A DIFFERENT WAY OF STATING THE UNOFFICIAL PRESBYTERIAN MOTTO OF "*REFORMED & ALWAYS REFORMING.*"

WE ARE A REFORMED CHURCH & WE MUST ALWAYS REMAIN OPEN TO THE MOVEMENT OF GOD IN OUR OWN LIVES & OUR OWN TIME – "RE-FORMING" US INTO THE PEOPLE GOD WOULD HAVE US BECOME.

"IN ORDER TO KEEP THE TRADITION, SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO CHANGE IT."

IN ORDER TO KEEP THE TRADITION THAT JOHN KNOX INTENDED TO PASS ON TO US, THERE ARE SOME THINGS THAT HAVE TO BE CHANGED REGARDING HIS POSITIONS & HIS WORDS.

IN 1982, POPE JOHN PAUL II HAD AN HISTORIC MEETING WITH THE MODERATOR OF THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND.

IRONICALLY, THEY CHOSE TO MEET IN EDINBURGH AT THE STATUE OF JOHN KNOX!
SOME WOULD SAY THAT WHEN THEY DID, THE EARTH SHOOK FROM KNOX ROLLING OVER IN HIS GRAVE
BENEATH THEM!

THE JOHN KNOX OF THE 16TH CENTURY *WOULD* HAVE BEEN ROLLING OVER.
BUT I THINK IF JOHN KNOX HAD BEEN ALIVE IN THE 20TH CENTURY, HE WOULD HAVE BEEN OVERJOYED
AT SUCH A MEETING!

SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO CHANGE THE TRADITION IN ORDER TO KEEP IT.
WHAT, IN OUR OWN DAY, NEEDS TO BE CHANGED TO KEEP THE TRADITIONS OF OUR FAITH AND THE
TRADITIONS OF THE BIBLE ALIVE?

WHAT, IN OUR OWN *LIVES*, NEEDS TO CHANGE TO KEEP US AS THE PERSON GOD INTENDS US TO BE?
THE SECOND MAXIM – THE ONE THAT I’VE JUST PICKED UP FROM SOMEWHERE ALONG LIFE’S JOURNEY IS
THIS – *DON’T LET SOMEONE ELSE’S BEHAVIOR DETERMINE YOURS.*

I THINK OF THIS IN RELATION TO JOHN KNOX BECAUSE HE WAS A MAN WHO SIMPLY KNEW WHO HE WAS
& KNEW WHAT GOD HAD CALLED HIM TO BE & TO DO.

HE WASN’T EASILY INFLUENCED OR PERSUADED BY OTHERS.

I THINK THIS IS A MAXIM THAT WE CAN ALL USE.

HOW OFTEN HAVE YOU FOUND YOURSELF COMPROMISING YOUR ACTIONS, YOUR ATTITUDES, YOUR
BEHAVIOR & EVEN YOUR WORDS BECAUSE OF THOSE OF ANOTHER PERSON?

HOW OFTEN DO YOU FIND YOURSELF MATCHING SOMEONE ELSE’S BAD BEHAVIOR WITH BAD BEHAVIOR
OF YOUR OWN?

HOW OFTEN DO THE RUDE ACTIONS OF ANOTHER CAUSE YOU TO SINK TO AN EQUAL LEVEL OF
RUDENESS?

YOU KNOW WHAT I’M TALKING ABOUT, DON’T YOU?

I THINK SOMEONE LIKE JOHN KNOX CAN TEACH US – IN AN ODD SORT OF WAY, BECAUSE HE COULD BE
MIGHTY RUDE & CRUEL HIMSELF – TO KNOW WHO YOU ARE & BE FIRM IN THAT KNOWLEDGE & NOT ALLOW
SOMEONE ELSE’S BEHAVIOR TO DETERMINE YOURS.

RESIST THE TEMPTATION TO RETURN EVIL FOR EVIL.

BE STEADFAST IN GOODNESS, LOVE & KINDNESS IN ALL YOUR DEALINGS WITH OTHERS, REGARDLESS OF
WHAT THEIR BEHAVIOR HAPPENS TO BE TOWARD YOU.

YES, IN AN ODD SORT OF WAY, I THINK THAT’S A LESSON WE CAN LEARN FROM THE LIFE OF JOHN KNOX.

ONE OF THE MOST MEMORABLE EXPERIENCES I’VE EVER HAD IN TRAVELLING, IS VISITING ST. GILE’S
CATHEDRAL IN EDINBURGH WHERE JOHN KNOX SERVED AS PASTOR & SEEING HIS STATUE THERE & LOOKING AT
THE JOHN KNOX HOUSE ON WHAT IS KNOWN AS “THE ROYAL MILE.”

ACROSS THE FRONT OF THAT HOUSE – WRITTEN IN THE LANGUAGE OF OLD SCOTLAND - ARE THE WORDS
– “*LOVE GOD ABOVE ALL & YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.*”

PERHAPS MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE, THAT IS THE MESSAGE THAT JOHN KNOX HAS LEFT US. AMEN.

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