

# JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

## Remember What You Have Learned

### Deuteronomy 11

Sunday, May 15, 2022

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Cornelius Vanderbilt was once the richest man in the world. One day he got lost walking through the woods. His mind was preoccupied with business challenges, family issues, and problems in his heart.

All of his heavy thoughts caused him to get disoriented in the forest. He didn't know what to do. So, he sat down under a tree, closed his eyes and went to sleep.

He woke up a little later with a forest ranger kicking his feet to wake him up. The ranger looked down at him and asked, "Who are you and where are you going?"

Vanderbilt said those two questions were like ice water to his mind. They cleared his thoughts like nothing else could and set a clear path before him. He was so taken by those questions that he offered that forest ranger a job. Vanderbilt said, "He didn't take the job but I offered to pay him handsomely to move to the city with me and wake me up every day with those two questions: "Who are you and where are you going?"

I believe that is an appropriate story to share on this graduation Sunday when we celebrate those high school seniors who will begin a new chapter of their lives. It is also appropriate as we celebrate the youth in our church who have ended their school year and look forward to a new one. "Who are you and where are you going?" As all of us grow and move from one chapter to the next in our lives it is important that we evaluate ourselves. Are we clear and satisfied with who we are and where we are going?

Those are two vitally important questions to ask because it is very difficult to find success and joy in life without having the right answers to those two questions.

A big part of coming to worship and growing in your faith is discovering who you are and where you are going. If you are not sure, I am confident today's message will help you, whether you are recent graduate, a middle-aged person with a family and a

mortgage or retired. The key is remembering what you have learned.

Annie Dillard writes about the Eskimos of Canada's northern tundra. When they travel by foot across these great expanses of flat land, they mark their way by erecting six-foot tall piles of stones. As they venture forward they also look backwards, making sure they can see where they came from. When the pile of stones is nearly out of sight, they erect another pile, thereby assuming that no matter how far they venture forward, they can always find their way home. (2)

Baccalaureate Sunday is a time for both venturing forward and looking back. Like those Eskimos, wise graduates mark their way with piles of stones. Looking back to these stones, they can go into the future, knowing where they came from.

I believe our scripture for today provides rock solid lessons, piles of stone, if you will, for graduates and for all of us as we move forward in life. They remind us of who we are and where we come from so we can move ahead with confidence, grounded by our faith and values.

The lessons come from the Hebrew Bible--the Old Testament, the book of Deuteronomy. The children of Israel are nearing the Promised Land. Moses will not finish the journey with them, but he is preparing them. He is giving them their final marching orders. There are a few principles that we can draw from Moses' instructions to his people which will help you who are graduates begin your journey into the Promised Land of adulthood, college and the workplace. I am grateful to King Duncan and Frank Lyman for their insights and inspiration as I prepared this message.

One of the lessons Moses gives to the people is to **Remember the Commandments**. Actually, he says a great deal more than that! He says, "Therefore shall you keep ALL the commandments which I command you this day, that you may be strong . . ."

Keep ALL the commandments. Duncan reminds us "That's good advice whether we are graduating from high school, or preparing to start a family, or entering the workplace or nearing retirement. If you want to stay strong in this world, make a commitment now to keep the commandments."

High tech guru Guy Kawasaki gave the Baccalaureate Address at the Palo Alto High School in 1999. He gave the graduates 10 rules for success. Kawasaki has earned that right, for he is not only a successful business person, but he is also a successful writer and speaker. He gave these rules in inverse order--beginning with number ten. Number 3 on his list of ten was PLAY TO WIN AND WIN TO PLAY.

But listen to what was Number 2 on his list: OBEY THE ABSOLUTES. Here is how he put it: "Playing to win, however, does not mean playing dirty. As you grow older and older, you will find that things change from absolute to relative. When you were very young, it was absolutely wrong to lie, cheat, or steal. As you get older, and particularly when you enter the workforce, you will be tempted by the 'system' to think in relative terms. 'I made more money.' 'I have a nicer car.' 'I went on a better vacation.' Worse, 'I didn't cheat as much on my taxes as my partner.' 'I just have a few drinks. I don't take cocaine.' 'I don't pad my expense reports as much as others . . .'

"This is dead wrong," continues Kawasaki. "Preserve and obey the absolutes as much as you can. If you never lie, cheat, or steal, you will never have to remember who you lied to, how you cheated, and what you stole.

"There absolutely are absolute rights and wrongs," Kawasaki concludes.

That's what Moses is saying to the people of Israel. "Obey the absolutes." "Remember the commandments," he says. Duncan says, "These aren't the ten suggestions or the ten friendly reminders. These are commandments from a just and loving God. This is how you shall live: "You shall not kill . . . You shall not steal . . . You shall not commit adultery . . . You shall not bear false witness . . . etc."

When God gave us the commandments, God was telling us that in order to live healthy successful lives we must have boundaries. There must be some guardrails around our lives. Someone once said, "There is a moral law at work in this universe. You do not break that law. You only break yourself upon it."

Remember the commandments. That's number one, that's the first pillar of stone.

The second pillar of stone is **Welcome the Challenges**. We all know that life is not easy. But guess what? Life is not supposed to be easy! God wants us to grow. The only way we can grow is by welcoming and overcoming challenges.

Paul Smith in his book, *God's Plan For Our Good*, tells about a man he knew who was born with no arms. But this handicap was offset by the fact that he was also born with a very wise mother. He tells the story of the day when this mother and a neighbor stood watching her armless child, a toddler, rolling on the floor and crying and trying to pull his shirt over his head with his feet. Finally, the neighbor could stand it no longer. "Why won't you help him?" she cried. His mother looked her friend in the eye and replied, "I am helping him!"

Today that man lives a normal life, dressing himself, eating, even writing with his feet. And he is grateful to his mother for helping him by not doing for him what he needed to do for himself!

By contrast Paul Smith knew another mother who was just the opposite. She told her son everything she wanted him to know and to do. He was never allowed to be on his own or to make his own decisions about anything. Even when he was a teenager, she laid out every article of clothing for him every morning. At age fourteen, most of this young man's friends were seven or eight years' old. He was the most helpless, immature young man Smith says that he has ever met.

Someone once said that "Successful people have one thing in common: They have developed the habit of doing what unsuccessful people aren't willing to do!"

And one thing successful people develop the habit of doing is welcoming challenges and being willing to overcome them. If you spend your life looking for the easy way out, you will never grow strong. You will never develop into the person God destined you to be. You will often look back at your challenges and see that they were the greatest blessings in your life.

Here is another way to look at it. I once heard a speaker say "Choose your hard." Is it hard to go to the gym? Sure it is. But it's also hard to be out of shape and overweight. Is it hard to go to the doctor and hear

the truth? Sure it is. But it's also hard to be sick and never get well. Is it hard to have that hard conversation with a loved one? Sure it is. But it's also hard to live with bitterness and resentment. with bitterness and resentment.

Moses says to the people: "For the land, which you go to possess, is not as the land of Egypt, out of which you came, where you sow seed, and water it with your foot, as a garden of herbs. But the land, which you go to possess is a land of hills and valleys . . ."

Did you notice that? Moses informed them that the land to which they were crossing was a land of hills and valleys. This may sound terrible to us but for the Hebrews it was music to their ears. The Bible says that the Hebrew people spent years as slaves in Egypt struggling with every season with a decent harvest. Yet when Moses told them that their new land was one of the hills and valleys they knew things would be different. Why? Frank Lyman writes, "The highest hill in all of Israel is Mt. Hermon, on the very northern border of Israel. It captures and holds the snows of winter, only to release them as water with the thaw of spring. This melting water of Mt. Hermon becomes the Jordan River which irrigates all of Israel.

"The valleys were also a blessing for they would be fertile, protected lands. As Moses said, these valleys would 'drink rain from heaven.' Moses' words have been so true that Israel has become the fruit and vegetable basket for much of Europe. One day we will look back at the hills and the valleys in our life and see that they were blessings in disguise, helping us become the people God destined us to be.

Welcome the challenges.

Keep the commandments. Welcome the challenges. And here's the last pillar of stone: **Stay the Course.** Do not be distracted from serving God.

Moses says to the people: "Take heed to yourselves, that your heart be not deceived, and you turn aside, and serve other gods, and worship them . . ."

Graduates, guard your faith and never let anything take priority over your relationship with God and your commitment to the church. Oh, it's easy to let other things become more important than your faith. You will soon see as you enter the freedom of college and grow into young adulthood. But hear this: You will never regret making your faith a priority. However, you will always regret the times when you didn't choose to make faith a priority. It is that simple.

Let me take it a step further. I believe one day we will all give an account of the gifts we used and the gifts we refused to use for the glory of God. That is what the parable of the talents is all about. Remember what happened to the man who buried his talent in the ground? Well, let's just say that the person who gave him the talent was very disappointed. There is nothing more tragic than a buried talent.

One of the first Bibles I ever received had this message written on the cover: "Expect great things from God; Attempt great things for God." This is a motto I have tried to live by since I was a child. How about you? "What are you doing with your life today to give it back to God as a gift? Are you preparing yourself spiritually, emotionally, mentally, physically, financially, and relationally to meet the next opportunity? Are you fully motivated to serve God in every area of your life? Or have you lost your zeal and enthusiasm? Do you need to fan into flame the gift of God that is in you? Are you sitting on the sideline or are you immersed in ministry? Now is the time to take action!"

Consider what Christ has done in your life. Reflect on what Christ has blessed you with. Recall all the gifts Christ has given you. Does that not inspire you to do your best? It should! So may you go back to your homes, workplaces, and communities and pray, "Lord, you can count on me! Put me to work. I promise to give you my best." If you live up to those words, your legacy will be eternal.

While doing research for a doctoral thesis, a young man spent a year with a group of Navajo Indians on a reservation in the Southwest. He lived with one family, sleeping in their hut, eating their food, working with them, and generally living their life. The elderly grandmother of the family spoke no English, yet a very close friendship formed between the grandmother and the doctoral student. They seemed to share the common language of love and they intuitively understood each other. Over the months he learned a few phrases of Navajo, and she picked up words and phrases in English.

When it was time for the young man to return to the university and write his thesis, the tribe held a going-away celebration for him. It was marked by sadness since he had developed a close relationship with all those in the village. As he prepared to get into his pickup truck and drive away, the old grandmother

came to tell him goodbye. With tears streaming from her eyes, she placed her hands on either side of his face, looked directly into his eyes, and said, "I like me best when I'm with you."

Many of us have discovered that same feeling when we make following Jesus a priority. We bow our heads and pray, "Lord, I like me best when I'm with you."

Moses gives us three pillars of stones to guide us into the future. Keep the commandments. Welcome the challenges. Stay the course. May these pillars of stone help you remember who you are as a child of God and where God is guiding you.