

Pastor Kevin Garman

Theme: Friendship

Scripture: John 6:56-69

August 22nd 2021

We Shall Overcome

Last week we talked about my camping east of Missoula and reflected with the Pete Seeger song, "My Land is a Good Land." This week we look at the tale of friendship as I drove to Havre and concluded my vacation in Denver, and we will look to another folk song of America by reflecting with the song, "We Shall Overcome." This week's story is filled with my reflections from the banks of the Missouri river, an adventure of exploring an underground city, and we will conclude with a reflection on relationship building. Our question we have asked the past couple weeks is what does it mean to be human? We will wrestle with this question as we look at the chaos in our world and try to find peace in the midst of this tension we all feel within our world right now.

We ended last week's adventures with me stopping in Great Falls, MT as I traversed back from Missoula, Idaho, and Washington state on my way to Havre, MT to visit with my girlfriend. Great Falls was not quite the image I had in my mind from the photos I had looked up of the surrounding area. I meandered throughout the cement walkways of the city passing block to block on my way to Hotel Avron, the historic hotel built in 1890 to accommodate for the vagabonds and wanderers searching for opportunity and destiny in the West. The exhaustion began to sink in from driving non stop the past few days as I journeyed from Bozeman to Missoula, Missoula to Washington/Idaho, and back to Montana. I was going to call it an early night before I made my way to Havre.

I woke up that morning, scarfed down whatever breakfast bar I bought at the convenient store, and took off on state road 87, but y'all no at this point I hadn't stayed on any single road throughout this trip. When Fort Benton came up on the exit, I thought, "Why not?!" veered to the right and proceeded to drive through main street until I pulled over to stop and admire the Missouri River. Standing just beneath the massive statue of Lewis, Clark, Sacagawea and Jean-Baptiste, I was reminded of my undergraduate studies and the lessons I had learned from the Taoist religion.

Taoism is a philosophical and spiritual tradition of China. There are three predominant religions which have deeply influenced China and its traditions, and those religious traditions are Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. Taoism and Confucianism originate around similar times and they are two sides of the same coin in many ways. Where Confucianism is legalistic, straight-forward, and more disciplined path, Taoism is more for us free spirits who want to find the rhythm to our own tune and follow the Way of the Universe, or the Tao. As I looked at the rhythm and flow of the majestic river, I couldn't help but reflect on the mighty river that had swept me off my feet a year ago and led me to Glendive/Wibaux, Montana. Just like a good Taoist, I did not find the Way when it spoke Eastern Montana, and as any good Taoist, I did not resist this nudge by the Spirit to follow my intuition. I could feel that adventurous spirit as I looked at the swirling, murky waters of the river. Once again, I had found peace and solace on this trip.

The Missouri River was not the only pit stop I made as I was near the Fort Benson historical museum. I paid my admission and began looking through the museum. Then it hit me. Montanans and Appalachians share something in common, we are great storytellers. You Montanans share different tales and different characters, but you, like Appalachians, love to tell people of your stories. We all do in many ways, no matter where we come from in this world.

Stories are what form our identity, break us as we divide ourselves against one another, and if we allow them to, maybe, just maybe, they influence us to do wonderful, astounding things that go down in annals of history for all to hear. Fort Benson was a collection of these types of stories. From steamboats, to fur trappers, to Native American folklore, and even a little picture frame detailing the work of Brother Van, the stories of Fort Benson were jumping out at me through the fort you could tour and the displays with the various artifacts people had donated over the years. Fort Benson was a reminder that we all have a story to tell, no matter how great or small, we all have a story. However, Great Falls was not my final destination, so I got back in the car and took off down state road 87 as I got closer and closer to Havre.

Waiting for me in Montana was, what I would consider, the greatest woman in Montana. Kelly Jo and I visited briefly and began packing up my car to head to Beaver Creek Campground with her Newfoundland named Samson taking up the entire backseat with no room to spare, a King Charles Cavalier named Deliliah sitting in a lap, and we had no room for the alley cat

Stu because we were packed to the brim of a night we both will never forget. Our camping spot was perfect! We were nestled just behind a grove of aspens blocking the view from the road right next to the creek where we could all cool off in the hot summer weather. We roasted hot dogs, ate smores, and looked up at the stars just barely able to the Milky Way band stretching across the heavens. It was magical and unforgettable, so much that we stayed another night.

One of my favorite adventures was touring the museum of the underground city of Havre. I won't ruin all the details of the tour if you have not been, however, it is believed that a couple of rowdy fellows decided they didn't take to kindly to the bar owner's comments to them the past few evenings as they guzzled down their ales after a long day's work. These two individuals did what any sensible inebriated individual does when they are angry, and they burned the bar down for laughs and giggles. Well as we all know from either living or growing up in the Great Plains, it is mighty windy here as the wind blew the fire throughout the town decimating nearly everything just before winter. The people got to work and began expanding some of the underground alleyways built for sewage lines and the underground piping of the city.

As you can imagine, all types of characters and stories began to emerge during this time. Curly, who sounds like he is more a character from some murder, drug drama you would find on Netflix, and Long George, a six foot six, rough and tough cowboy kind of guy who was a horse hustler and wanted by the Federal Government. The stories and the displays of this underground city is what made the tour so special. It was the attentiveness to the stories of these old, forgotten peoples that the tour guides and curators so carefully and truthfully told which made it memorable. Just like the characters of all these tales, the unique part about my journey throughout Montana and a section of the Pacific Northwest was the stories of the people I met, the stories I could come back and tell, and the ways this collection of stories would change and shape me.

I have intentionally avoided preaching from the gospel this month, because in this section of the lectionary, we have been reading what we call the "bread passages." If you have listened carefully to the readers over the past few weeks, then it may have sounded as if we read the same gospel lesson over and over again. The bread passages are important to our reflection today though because when Jesus is referring to the bread, I believe Jesus is referring to the relationships he has built throughout his ministry. The bread of life is to realize we must love ourselves to love our

neighbor. The bread of life is the way we serve others through our faith and commitment to the gospel. The bread of life is as simple as sharing a meal and story with one another to help us understand each other and our perspective. If I am being honest, then it seems we are in a relationship crisis in our world.

We live in a world divided. We always have and most likely always will. Division and tension aren't always bad things, but when there is tension and division in which people assume are not resolvable, people begin to react in fear and anger of the other. We have seen this far too much in our world lately as we see people constantly at each other's throats for wearing masks, we see turmoil throughout our world in virtually every continent and country, we see the Delta variant reminding us Covid has not ended, and it seems as if every day we awake at the edge of insanity waiting for life to either push us over the edge or welcome us back to comfort of the ledge on which we stand. I hear Jesus beckoning us back with the words, "Do not be afraid," as he stretches out his hand reciting the words, "I am the Bread of Life."

I saw Jesus this past week during an interview discussing the harrowing situation unfolding in Afghanistan. I saw Jesus in the eyes, the terror, and in the face of an Afghan journalist in Kabul named Ali. Ali's demeanor was hopeless and desolate. Even he was in disbelief on how rapidly the Taliban had swept through the country destroying everything in its path. He explained Kabul was a city of wanderers and many of the people in Kabul weren't even Afghani who were going to get caught up in all this, but these people of Kabul were the sons and daughters of refugees seeking a new start, sons and daughters of others displaced throughout Afghanistan who had already left their home, and these were the sons and daughters who have lived in a life of terror as their whole lives have been filled with nothing but death, violence, and destruction. Kabul is similar to Denver or Billings as it is a central hub of the country.

Although there is so much negativity, unresolved tensions, existential problems daunting and terrifying, and division surrounding us, we must remain diligent in the foundations of the gospel of Jesus Christ, which is building relationships through love. I hold onto this hope and love that I will do all the good I can in this world before I take my final breath. I hold onto to hope and love that through these disturbing events we face in today's world that we will learn to have a tender heart to the innocent blood being shed throughout our world and simultaneously a tough heart to call out the leaders, institutions, and powers that divide and oppress us. This is the hope

and the heart of the gospel, this is the bread of life. This hope and love isn't much, but we follow a man who 2,000 years ago stood up to the greatest empire the world had ever seen and he was crucified for what he believed. This is not a call to martyrdom but an invitation to the gospel to live the words Jesus proclaimed and "Take up thy cross!" This is not a burden you shall bear alone but a burden you bear with your fellow human beings, your fellow neighbors as we build the Kingdom of God collectively for a more equitable, compassionate world.

In conclusion, you may feel powerless and hopeless in moments such as this where we it feels like the world is crumbling before our eyes...I know I sure do. However, in this place of abandonment and hopelessness, let us be reminding of the stories that shaped us and made us today. Are these tales of grandeur, beauty, and memorable moments in which you will never forget? Yes! Are the stories we tell, also tales of struggle, oppression, and deep grief? Yes! Life is full of suffering and joy and Jesus is the bread of life, the invitation to remind us love is the answer, we all are capable of good in this world, and a compassionate heart is a heart that is needed in times such as these just as much as it is a tough heart to call out the powers that be. May we each find that voice and that story to call our own to shape us and mold us into the people we have to become in world such as this. May God protect and grant peace to all the people of Afghanistan and all the people found within her borders. Go out and build the Kingdom of God, neighbors! Take up your cross and tell your story as you spread the love of gospel throughout Eastern Montana and beyond. Amen.