

*Who Owns You*  
John 17: 6-19  
May 24, 2009  
Memorial Day Weekend  
First Federated Church  
Peoria, Illinois

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Who owns you?

That may strike you as an odd question; rather “cheesy” like a gangster movie where a Marlon Brando character says to someone who compromised their integrity, “Don’t ever forget this, Kid; I *OWN* you!”

Nevertheless, I asked many people this past week that very question, “Who owns you?” One young lady at a coffee shop I frequent—I frequent a lot of them and have the punch cards to prove it!—initially responded with the name of the shop’s owner. When I asked, “Who?”, she repeated his name and told me that he owned the little independent coffee shop.

“*He* owns you?” I asked. She paused and then said, “Well no; I own myself.” Then she paused and asked, “Is this a trick question?” “No,” I assured her, I am merely doing a little informal sermon research.

The world wants you to believe that no one owns you because it understands that when we deny the Owner we open ourselves to other owners. But thinking that no one owns us is as illusionary as a hologram. In our funeral liturgy we commend those whom we love with these words, “Into your hands, O Merciful Savior, we commend your servant, a sheep of your fold, a lamb of your flock, a sinner of your redeeming.”

Jesus knew that we are not our own. That is why he said in Matthew’s gospel, “*You cannot serve two masters for you will love the one and hate the other. You cannot serve God and mammon; the things of this world.*” (Matthew 6:24)

The apostle Paul also recognized this truth when he wrote to the Corinthians, “*You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price.*” (I Corinthians 6:19)

And chronologically, he wrote later in his life, “*For we are not our own masters when we live or when we die. While we live, we live to please the Lord. And when we die, we go to be with the Lord. So in life and in death, we belong to the Lord.*” (Romans 14:7-8, NLT)

John Donne picked up the theme in his famous “Meditation XVII.”

*“No man is an Island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the Continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friends or of thine own were; any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind.”*

In the simplicity surrounding Walden Pond, Henry David Thoreau discovered that if we are not careful, the things that we think we own often end up owning us. If you stop and think about it, his reflection is truer than we like to admit. If you don’t believe me, just remember the last time you took your car in to be serviced. Your world stopped and revolved around the car. The truth of the matter is that far too many people end up losing their soul while wooing the world.

Our lesson this morning is part of what is called Jesus' "High Priestly Prayer." In it, He prays not for himself but "for those who belong to Him." In other words He is praying for those who desire to take Him seriously, to follow Him and to become travelers on what the early Church called "The Way."

Jesus prayed, *"I have told them about You. They were in the world, but then You gave them to me. Actually, they were always Yours, and You gave them to me..."*

*I have given them Your word. And the world hates them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I'm not asking You to take them out of the world, but to keep them safe from the evil one. They do not belong to this world any more than I do. Make them holy by Your truth; teach them Your word, which is truth. Just as You sent me into the world, I am sending them into the world. And I give myself as a holy sacrifice for them so they can be made holy by Your truth." (New Living Translation)*

If we do not own ourselves, if we are owned by another, and if that Other is Jesus, then what does that mean for our lives, individually and as a congregation?

Let me begin by saying what it does *not* mean. It does not mean that our essential "personhood" will be violated. Years ago I underwent a series of hypnosis treatments for my stutter. Some of the people who knew me best and loved me most were worried that I would be "changed," not that the "endearing" stutter would be gone, but that "I" would be gone. Well, neither happened!

An Old Testament professor I had in seminary, Arnold Black Rhodes, known affectionately simply as "A.B.," marveled at how God never violated the personalities of the Old Testament prophets. Nathan was a great story teller who was able to boldly speak truth to power and get away with it. Isaiah was a big picture kind of guy who saw long term consequences in terms of hundreds of years. Jeremiah was a youth and had that youthful exuberance of saying things that rubbed people the wrong way. Hosea fell in love with and married a temple prostitute, and in reading Daniel you wonder if he wasn't "trippin" on some funny mushrooms or LSD for he had apocalyptic visions.

Neither does it mean that you will suddenly become a "holy roller," as they said in my youth or that you will suddenly become "obnoxious"—unless you already *are* obnoxious. If you are truly touched by Jesus' spirit, people will not try to avoid you. In fact, quite the opposite will be true. People will be *attracted* to you because while you will not have a "personality" change, you will have a "character" change. There will be something about you that others will want to be in touch with.

Being owned by God doesn't mean that *who* we are will in any real sense be violated, but it does mean that we will begin to sense a change going on deep inside us. There will be a strange stirring in our hearts. That stirring is the Holy Spirit awakening within us. As the Spirit stirs, we will begin to see things differently. We will look at the world differently. It is as if scales have fallen from our eyes and we can see clearly for the very first time.

In his autobiography Ronald Reagan talked about how terribly near-sighted he was. One day, as a child, his mother took him to an eye doctor and he was fitted with a pair of glasses. Putting those glasses on opened up a whole new world for him. He saw birds in trees, house numbers and even things across the room; things he never really knew existed.

Paul talked about it in these terms: *“When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face-to-face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood.”*

Sometimes this awakening comes slowly; so slowly, in fact, that we don’t even notice it until one day we just realize “something’s different.” Sometimes it comes quite suddenly through an “Ah-ha” experience whereby what we never saw before becomes quite obvious. It may be when we hold our child for the very first time, or at a baptism, or when we sing a hymn or read a poem or see a movie or an insight that suddenly appears out of nowhere while we are doing nothing in particular.

Sometimes it is spiritually bone jarring like when an illness forces us to face our own mortality. At those moments we realize what is really important in life. It isn’t the job—no one on their death bed whispers as their final words, “I wish I would have spent one more day at the office,”—nor is it the house or the car or *anything* else.

Deep down we all know that “Things” don’t give our life meaning. “Things” cannot buy peace of mind. The peace that passes understanding is not found in “things.” It is found in knowing that there *is* a love that will not let us go no matter where we travel in life. Contentment is not found in “things,” either. The Apostle Paul wrote: *“I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content...in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want.”*

Do you know what the secret is? It is in knowing who *really* owns you. *I can do all things in Him who strengthens me.*

Being owned by Jesus means that we will be less likely to get side-tracked by the urgent at the expense of the important. Expediency, doing the easy thing rather than the right thing, worrying about the short term rather than the long term, has major consequences in life.

Judy White Edelson once wrote about how the life’s little decisions can have long term effect upon our lives. She was a child of the ‘60s with all that that means. As she approached 50 she reflected upon the implications of life’s seemingly little decisions.

“When I was younger, I thought my past didn’t mean anything. I thought things left undone, things said in haste, niceties ignored, birthdays forgotten weren’t important. I was a good person... forgetful, over-committed, but not nasty or intentionally mean-spirited... just self-involved and excusable. I thought time flowed over these things and covered them up so they no longer existed.”

“I used to laugh about my mother telling me, ‘That will go on your permanent record.’ I thought I had no permanent record. I was young and had a long, full lifetime in which to make mistakes and explore endless possibilities.”

She went on to say that she “meandered around” for a while with never a moment’s concern about the possibility that anything would come back to haunt her. She lived in the “Now,” “in the Moment.” She took comfort in saying to herself, “Oh, well, it was all worth it.” With a daughter of her own, she realized that “It wasn’t all worth it.”

“I have so much waste in my life,” she reflected, “that it almost washes away my future, making it difficult for me to use my past to go forward. It’s like reaching your hand into a big bag knowing there are gems in it but that there’s also a lot of slimy stuff you would really rather not touch.”

“I’m not giving advice,” she continued, “on how to transform a mended past into a mended future, though that is possible. It has been done by many of us Mamas and Papas who now tell our beloved children the same thing our parents told their beloved children: ‘That will go on your permanent record.’”

She concludes with these words. “There *is* a permanent record. It lives on in the memories of all the people you have come in contact with. It lives on in your own perception of yourself, coloring and flavoring who you become, what you expect to be able to accomplish and how you live your life. Every decision you make determines your tomorrow. Your future is in your past. Or said in another way, your past is the engine that drives your future.”

“And if one day you decide you no longer want to be the person you have become, or live the life you are living, it is no easy task to stop all that accumulated momentum. You won’t go to bed tonight and get up tomorrow a new person. You don’t have the same option little babies have, learning to walk and talk and think for the first time; you have to learn to walk and talk and think in a new way. That accomplished, there is the pesky little problem of those people who know you as the person you were, not the person you want to be; who through no perverse unkindness, but through expectation, keep pulling you back into the old mold...”

“So your life history is your permanent record. You can’t shake it. You may be able to redeem it with great effort, but given my druthers, I would rather have written my permanent record with forethought and careful planning, and skipped the would’uvs, could’uvs, should’uvs.”

Wouldn’t we all!

Recognizing our true owner enables to discern what is truly important, to put first things first, but it also means that we are “eye-witnesses” of God’s redeeming love. That is what Jesus meant when he prayed that while his followers were not “of” the world but “in” the world.

“*Make them holy,*” he prayed. “*Just as You sent me, I am sending them.*” Jesus sends those who would follow him into the world to do what He would do; to do His work, the work of the Kingdom, to share His love.

“*When the Holy Spirit has come upon you,*” He said in our lesson from Acts, “*you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Sama’ria and to the end of the earth.*”

It is a most interesting progression—game plan that Jesus laid out for us. We begin the work of the Kingdom in Jerusalem among those whom we know best. But we must not stop there. That is too comfortable. We must go farther.

We next go to Judea—among those who are like us; who look like us, talk like us, live among us, have our same values and culture. But we must not stop there. That is too comfortable. We must go farther. Next we go among the Samaritans—to those who are *not* like us, among people we might not even like for one reason or another. They may be in our communities but they are of a different culture, a different way of life. Finally, we go to the ends of the earth. We are called to be engaged in worldwide ministry. That is why we have all of those flags in the back of our sanctuary. You cannot walk out of here without being at least subtly reminded that our call to follow Jesus is about more than just our community. It is about the whole wide world.

Who owns you? Answering that question is the challenge before us. How we answer that question will determine whether we “go” or “stay.” This month’s Big Idea is “Disciples Go.”

To God be the glory. Amen.