



**"Remember"**

**Scripture – Deuteronomy 6:1-9**

**Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson**

**Sunday, October 31, 2021**

*Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children ... Bind them as a sign on your hand ... Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*

At a conference a few years ago, a colleague named Kim told a story about the power of words imprinted upon the heart.

Like many of us, Kim grew up in the church. She spent every Sunday morning of her childhood on a pew in the balcony, worshipping with her mother and brother and, then, running off to Sunday School. When she was in eighth grade, she entered the catechism class — where she learned the doctrines and creeds of the church before confirmation. Yes, Kim's home congregation took seriously the charge to nurture and support baptized children in the faith.

Many years after she was confirmed — when Kim was a grown woman with children of her own — her mother was diagnosed with Ovarian Cancer. The prognosis was bleak. During a seven-hour surgery, the doctor discovered that the cancer had already spread; there was little to be done. After the operation, as Kim was curled up beside her mom on the hospital bed, there was a knock on the door. A familiar face appeared around the curtain and, immediately, two sentences popped into Kim's head:

*What is your only comfort in life and in death?  
That I am not my own,  
but belong — body and soul, in life and in death —  
to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.*

These are the opening lines of the Heidelberg Catechism, one of the Reformed Confessions Kim learned in 8th grade. Though she hadn't realized it until that moment, she had carried these words in her heart for years. They'd been etched there ever since Kim first learned them from the woman now standing before her in the hospital room. With the unexpected visit of her 8th grade Catechism teacher, they rose to the forefront of her mind:

*I am not my own,  
but belong — body and soul, in life and in death —  
to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.*

The words of faith have a way of burrowing deep within us — taking up residence in our hearts, building a home in our souls. Some of us have the language of Scripture inscribed there; others carry the lyrics of beloved hymns or the refrains of oft-recited prayers. We have learned these words at the knee of parents and grandparents, heard them repeated by Sunday School teachers and mentors and echoed by saints within the congregation. We've recited these words in worship, in study, in daily devotion. We've sung them around the piano and practiced them in prayer circles. They shape our faith. And then, throughout life, they return to us — particularly in moments of confusion or crisis. As Kim discovered, they offer a lifeline in the midst of a stormy sea — an anchor for our restless or breaking hearts in the bedrock of the Gospel promise.

Whether from Scripture or song, creed or prayer, these words of faith ground our lives. But, more than that, they shape *who we are* as people of faith ... Not only in anxious moments when we cling to assurances of God's grace. But in the ordinary rhythms of life, when it could be easy to go about daily routines without considering God's claim on us.

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This was Moses' intention when he instructed the people to keep the great commandment in their hearts — that these words would shape the ethos and witness of the covenant community.

As you heard in the beginning of today's reading, Moses is instructing the people Israel in the Law of the Lord so that they may prosper in the Promised Land. At this point in the narrative, the Hebrew people — whom Moses led out of slavery and guided through the wilderness — now stand on a precipice. They are about to cross over into the Promised Land. So Moses is preparing them for this new chapter in their shared story. The book of Deuteronomy is a collection of commandments that govern right living. Together, these statutes make it clear that any prosperity the people enjoy in the Promised Land is not a *reward for* faithfulness, but the *result of* faithfulness ... That when they live according to the Law of God, the whole community will flourish.

Every law contained within the pages of Deuteronomy flows from the first and greatest commandment: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.*

In other words, the covenant community is to love God fully, with every fiber of their collective being. As one scholar so beautifully summarized it, "Israel's response to God ... is an extravagant love that involves conscience (heart), essence (soul), and vitality (might)."<sup>1</sup>

What Moses says next underscores the importance of this statute. *Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*

It is not enough, simply, to hear these words proclaimed when the community gathers. It is not enough, simply, to post them on their doors. No, the people are to commit this commandment to memory; they are to imprint it upon their hearts. "Love the Lord your God ..." should be the first words that spring to mind in the morning; "... with all your heart, your soul, your might" should be the quiet refrain that lulls the faithful to sleep each night. *Recite these words to your children*, Moses urges. 'Talk about them around the dinner table, and when you're

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<sup>1</sup> Dora R. Mbuwayesango, "Commentary on Deuteronomy 6:1-9" (2021), [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org).

cleaning your child's scraped knee; when you collect clothing for the needy or set a feast for the stranger, so that these words inform *every single* decision, *every single* conversation, *every single* action.'

If the people do this — if they recite these words to their children, and fix them on their foreheads, and write them on their doors — then this commandment will shape their faith. But, more than that, it will shape *who they are* as people of faith. For — in loving God with heart, soul, and might — they will become a community bound together by an ethic of love. They will become a nation defined by compassion and care. After all — if this first commandment is sealed upon the heart, if it truly orients one's entire being toward God — then there is no option *but* to treat the widow, the orphan, the immigrant with the same, extravagant love. That is precisely why — in the passage Greg preached two weeks ago — Jesus weds this commandment to another like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children ... Bind them as a sign on your hand ... Write them on the doorposts of your house.*

As it happens, the witness of Scripture and the annals of the church are testaments to the forgetfulness of God's people. Rather than following Moses' instructions upon entering the Promised Land, the covenant community worshipped other gods, neglected the needs of the poor and failed to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with their God. That's why God anointed kings and raised up prophets and, finally, sent the long-awaited Messiah — to re-orient wandering hearts.

Throughout time the church of Jesus Christ has also forgotten the greatest commandment. This is part of our history: Five hundred years ago, the western church was effectively exploiting the masses by promising forgiveness in exchange for a financial contribution. In response, Reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin and others who you see in that arc of figures atop our stained glass window tried to call the church back to faith and faithfulness. One of the ways they did so was by reclaiming Old Testament texts the church had practically forgotten — reclaiming and re-centering the commandments in worship, reminding the church what it means to live in covenant relationship with God.

Alas, the Reformation did not completely reform the church. Five hundred years later, we are still confessing the ways we, too, have failed to love God with heart, soul and might, the ways we have failed to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Though we are generations removed from those who first heard Moses' words, his charge to us is the same: *Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children ... Bind them as a sign on your hand ... Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*

The charge stands because the work is the same. In every age, the covenant community must return to the words that shape our faith, and that shape *who we are* as people of faith. Whether the commandments of Scripture, or the lyrics of beloved hymns, the confessions of the church or simple reminders of God's claim on our lives, we carry these words in our hearts, we recite them to our children, we hold them close within our communal conscience. And, by God's grace, the Spirit seals these words upon our hearts and minds, so that they inform *every* decision, *every* conversation, *every* action — and we remember who we are.

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A few weeks before I left for my freshman year of college, while I was packing up my childhood bedroom and trying to convince myself I was ready to leave home, my mom gave me a gift. It was a bracelet with a single charm: a shell, the symbol of baptism. And as I fastened the bracelet on my wrist, as though binding a reminder of God's claim on my life as a sign upon my hand, my mom offered a simple charge: *Remember who you are and whose you are.* Remember who you are and whose you are.

It is the same phrase that a colleague of mine recites every morning as she drops her children off at school. They are the last words she speaks to them. After she's checked that they've grabbed their lunchboxes, after she's ensured the homework made its way into the bag, she gives her children hugs and says to them: *Remember who you are and whose you are.*

My colleague recites this phrase every morning because she wants her children to carry these words in their hearts. Whether they are learning their multiplication tables or eating their lunch or playing double-dutch on the blacktop, she wants them to remember that they belong to God. So that — when they see a little girl sitting alone in the cafeteria — they might invite her to join them at their table. Or — when they encounter a bully on the playground — they might stand up for the child being picked on. My colleague recites these words to her children so that — one day — they might grow into adults who feed the hungry and clothe the naked and welcome the stranger. She recites these words so that her children *always* remember that they are heirs of the covenant, set apart to love God with the whole of who they are, and to love their neighbors as themselves.

*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*

People of the Covenant, remember who you are and whose you are. Carry the words of faith in your heart, so that — in all things — your response to God and neighbor might be one of extravagant love.