

Don't Forget Who You Are

Jeremiah 2:4-13

September 2, 2007

I thought long and hard about admitting this to you today. But I remember the day well. It was Monday, July 30; the day that the divorce of Britney Spears and K-Fed became final. I saw that on the internet and got sucked in. The settlement reportedly handed Kevin \$15,000 a month for child support and an additional \$20,000 a month in spousal support. All of that was apparently spelled out in their prenuptial agreement.

Of course, there were the obligatory pictures that I had to look at: Britney in a bikini; Britney going through the drive up at Jack-in-the-Box; Britney getting on a plane bound for Hawaii; Britney with long hair, short hair, blond hair, dark hair, and no hair; Britney eating a hot dog; Britney eating a hamburger; Britney eating a taco; Britney before rehab; Britney after rehab; Britney before rehab again; Britney after rehab again; pregnant Britney; non-pregnant Britney; Britney in her car; they went on and on.

In my opinion, she and a number of other young women in Hollywood are a train wreck. We gossip about them and laugh at them. They provide the fodder for all sorts of late night comedy routines. As much as we hate to admit it, there is something fascinating about them.

The bottom line for me however, because I have my own young adult children, is that I find Britney to be a real tragedy. I would feel sorry for any young man or woman whose life seems so off track. But, when I am honest with myself – and sometimes this is hard – I find that I have a hard time condemning her because I too stand in the need of grace. Sometimes my own life is a tragedy as well – a train wreck waiting to happen - because there are times when I get caught in my own sins, shortcomings, failings, and utter goofiness. I too, get into real trouble when I forget who I am.

Corporations can also sometimes forget who they are and what they are all about. I don't know if you know it or not, but we are ready to celebrate a milestone anniversary in America. Just two days from now – September 4 – we will mark the 50th anniversary of the introduction by Ford Motor Company of the Edsel. I was pretty little, but I remember.

My understanding of the idea behind the Edsel is that Ford Motor Company wanted a car to compete in the market with Oldsmobile. They already had the Lincoln to compete with Cadillac, but wanted a car that was sort of up-scale, but not a luxury vehicle.

The car was initially named the “E Car” for experimental car. They had trouble finding a real name. Among those considered were the “Silver Sword,” “Thundercrest,” and “Utopian Turtletop.” But they finally settled on “Edsel” after Henry Ford's son.

Everything that could go wrong with the Edsel did. Among the problems were these:

- Except for the new grill configuration, there wasn't much new in the design of the car.
- The pushbutton automatic transmission was located in the center of the steering wheel which is an incredibly stupid place to put it.
- There was no Edsel plant; they were assembled at other Ford and Mercury plants and so parts got confused from time to time with other cars. They would sometimes arrive at dealerships with notes attached listing the parts that were missing.
- There was a recession in 1957 which slowed the economy and caused a drop-off in new car purchases.

It was just the wrong car at the wrong time. It is obviously not only individuals who get into trouble when they forget who they really are. Businesses as well, rise or fall on the ability to do things the right things at the right time. When people, businesses, organizations, and families forget who they really are, you can be pretty well assured that there is trouble brewing.

If you were to ask me who my favorite prophet is, I would tell you that it is Jeremiah. Among all of the prophets, Jeremiah's heart broke when he had to announce the judgment of God on the people. Because of that, he is known as the weeping prophet. He knew what the people could be, because he knew what they once were. It broke his heart to watch them ignore, betray, and turn away from the God who had brought them so far. In chapter two of his prophecy, Jeremiah tells the people what God had told him. God remembered how it used to be.

God remembered all of the years in the wilderness when they had been so faithful to each other. God reminded them of the time when they wandered in the desert after they were freed from slavery in Egypt. He reminded them of how he brought them to the Promised Land, the land flowing with milk and honey.

I don't recall if I have told you this story or not, but one of the most powerful recollections I have of my visit to Israel comes from the day when we were traveling by bus north from Jericho, close to the Dead Sea, to Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee. We were traveling along the Jordan River, through that lush valley which is irrigated from the waters of that river. As we traveled along, I looked out one side of the bus and saw a herd of cows. I then looked out the other side of the bus and saw a huge number of bee hives...truly a land of milk and honey.

God brought the children of Israel through the desert and settled them into this wonderful land, but then they forgot about him. They started chasing after other gods and goddesses, completely ignoring God who had brought them so far.

The first time that the Denver Broncos went to the Super Bowl was the 1977-78 season. It was my first year in seminary and I remember that year well. Craig Morton had been acquired from Dallas to run the offense at quarterback. He was a decent quarterback, but

not one of the great ones. To be honest, the rest of the offense wasn't too terrific either. But they had a great defense. It became known as the Orange Crush defense. They made it through the season on the strength of their defense, all the way to the Super Bowl against the Dallas Cowboys, played that year on January 15 in the New Orleans Superdome.

I remember a sports reporter asking Coach Red Miller a question about their offense and if it would change for the big game. Miller said, "You got to go with what brung ya." In other words, Denver would rely on their defense to win the game. I know that they say it is defense that wins football games, but not that year. The Broncos left their defense back in Denver and Dallas won the game - 27-10.

Getting back to Jeremiah, God was telling the people that they need to continue on with what brung them that far. It was God who had seen them through the tough times. It was God who had protected them from enemies. It was God who had fed them and given them water when they were thirsty. It was God who had gone before them in a pillar of fire and smoke.

But they had forgotten that and had decided to go after other gods. In the process, they had become as bankrupt as those false idols. The people were changing gods often as Larry King changes suspenders. Whoever heard of people's allegiance to different gods change so quickly?

God lifted up two examples. The people in Cyprus didn't change gods with a change in the direction of the wind. Even though they worshiped false gods, they at least didn't keep changing them. The people from Kedar, a confederation of desert tribes in the northern part of the Arabian Peninsula, didn't change their false gods back and forth. If these pagan people could stay with their gods, what in the world, God wondered, was wrong with the Israelites?

So the people had rejected God, the fountain of living water, and they had tried to dig their own cisterns to conserve water. They didn't understand that their human designed and built cisterns would crack and leak, while the living water of God would never cease flowing. The other gods do not give life, but they had been embraced in place of the real God of Israel who actually does give life – abundant and eternal.

It seems to me that the Israelites were under three false illusions. The first false illusion was that the true message of God can be found anywhere and that it doesn't matter what faith you have as long as you have faith. My question is: Faith in what?

The Christian proclamation is that God chose to come to earth with a particular identity. He came as Yehweh, not Baal. He came as Jesus, not Caesar Augustus, or an idol image on a pole. He came alive in the experience of a particular people.

How many of us have played hooky from worship in order to hit the links, saying that we can experience God just as well on the golf course as well as we can in church. I would

challenge you to show me a place in the New Testament where worship is conducted anywhere but with a group of like-minded individuals.

People today are quite fond of saying that they are spiritual, but not religious. Spirituality is easy. Religion is hard. Spirituality means that you can pick and choose what you want to believe and how you want to live. Being religious means that you join with the rest of God's people on a regular basis to work out the best way to follow your faith. Sometimes that way is difficult, but that doesn't excuse one's refusal to take it.

The Israelites were looking for an easy way out, for a softer life, for a life free of God-sized demands. So they chose to go after other gods that may have offered them comfort, but could never offer them salvation.

The second illusion under which the Israelites were operating was that all you have to do is verbally consent to accepting God; and the rest is cake. One of the problems that the church has always struggled with is cheap grace. Cheap grace is defined by German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer as the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ...

Simply believing in God and Christ is not enough. It requires a Matthew 25 mentality: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, visiting the oppressed and those in prison, caring for the sick, welcoming strangers, and loving one another.

The third illusion under which the Israelites were operating was that they believed that God was only there to meet their needs. When they stopped getting what they thought they should be getting, they went shopping around for other gods.

We know some things about the modern culture in which the present church operates. We know, for example, that modern people are drawn to churches that have an abundance of parking, clean restrooms, good child care, and attractive buildings. They are looking for high quality Sunday School programs, uplifting worship services, contemporary music, and not too many demands on one's time.

The message they want to hear is this: The church is here to meet your needs. Let me be clear about this. Now of course, we need to pay attention to the needs of the contemporary culture round about, but the bottom line is this. The church – this church – is not here to meet your needs. Church is not about you. If we believe that, then we have lost sight of what is central to the life of the church.

Worship is the opportunity to praise and glorify God, not receive some self-help message to ease the coming week.

Yes there is comfort to be found in worship, but we cannot ignore the prophetic edge which presents us with the challenges of living as the church in the midst of a culture that dismisses or ignores the church.

Yes, we have legitimate needs, but we also are called to a place where we can confess our sins, listen to the Word of God, and receive strength for carrying that Word out to the world.

The Israelites, to whom the prophetic message was given, had forgotten their source; had forgotten who had brought them so far; had forgotten who and whose they were. They were off track and headed for a wreck.

God called them back to the original plan. The message was that it was not all about them. It was all about God.

Forgetting your roots leads to disasters like the Edsel, like many misbehaving young adults, and like our own struggles with staying faithful. Staying faithful to God despite the temptations to do otherwise, is the only way to go.