

## Speaking the Language of Canaan, Part II

I left off last week with how influential the American Civil War was to me in my youth. The moment that “took me over the edge” was when we interviewed the oldest man in America during the early 1960’s in Bartow, Florida. He had been kidnapped at age eleven from Africa and sold eventually to a plantation owner in Virginia. My dad, my brother and I sat on the edge of our seats as he explained his life and events of the war. The highlight for us came toward the end of the conversation. I asked, “Mr. Smith, did you ever see or meet Robert E. Lee?” For as long as I live, I shall not forget what happened next. Mr. Smith’s eyes brightened, his near toothless smile swallowed his face and he said, “Oh yes, yessir indeed,” and he laughed a high, shrill laugh followed by, “Yessir, yessir, I did.”

Charlie Smith spoke in hushed tones of the time when he had been sent on business to Richmond when Robert E. Lee rode into town. Although Charlie could not read and therefore had not read descriptions of Lee, he could not have described him with less eloquence than historians Shelby Foote, J.I. Robertson or James McPherson. Mr. Smith said, “When he rode into town, everyone come to ‘da street.” Da women, ‘dey dip down in a courtesy and every man, white and black, ‘dey stand real still and all of ‘dem - all of ‘dem, mind you - ‘dey take off their hats as the Gen’al ride by. I ‘haint never seen a man ride more straight in ‘da saddle, I never seen a man ride more tall in his saddle then Gen’al Lee.” He referred to Lee in the kindest terms and with utmost respect.

Keep this interview in mind as I take you back further in my youth to the Washington D. C. area. The first nine years of my life were spent straddling the Mason Dixon Line (dividing the South from the North). Since our neighborhood was filled with kids whose sentiments were diversified, we had no problem dividing up when we played Civil War. I always chose South until one day while overpowering my opponent he cried out, “That’s the way with you southerners, you fight to keep your slaves!” I stopped, released him, stopped playing and in a most serious inquiry, I said, “I don’t own slaves and I don’t believe in slavery.” His reply was something to the effect, “You do if you are a Confederate.” Immediately, I went to Dad’s study and said, “Dad, do we believe in slavery?” He assured me that we did not. And at approximately the ripe old age of eight I got my first “States’ Rights” speech. Dad did his best to explain that many southerners were fighting for their rights within the parameter’s of their personal states verses the national government. The argument could well be made that if states’ rights permits human bondage, that this in essence could be fighting for slavery protection. The opposing argument could well be stated that time would have taken care of that with the continual influence of writings such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, ‘s approach and the invention of the cotton gin, making the augment for the need of slavery a mute point. Others would say, who’s to know and when, if the time would have ever come so why let another generation suffer? Believe me, I know all the arguments and it is one of the greatest conundrums of American history.

As we talked to Charlie Smith, a former American slave and now a free citizen who owned his own store, I learned much. At the age of 12, living deep below the Mason Dixon Line and listening to Charlie Smith, my interests piqued for the war that tore our nation apart and eventually brought us back together. Robertson and Foote both aptly say, before the Civil War people said, “The United States are” after the war people said, “The United States is.” Charlie Smith knew what it was to be mistreated as a slave and yet he maintained friendships with black and white before, during and after the war. To see a man talk so kindly of Robert E. Lee, the very personification of the people who seemed on the opposite side of his cause, spoke to me. Mr. Smith illustrated with Christian grace what it means to forgive individually and corporately. This man, Charlie Smith spoke the same language of the south as my white relatives, i.e. Christianity, forgiveness and patriotism. Returning to our text, Isaiah 19:18 that says, “*In that day shall five cities in the land of Egypt speak the language of Canaan....*” we see that the language of Canaan speaks so strongly that it serves as a mode of

transportation. Mr. Smith transported me back in time by his language and made me thirst to know more of the era in which he lived. This is why at Christchurch we want to have Sunday School teachers who speak the language of Heaven, those who know and love God and speak with a note in their voice that takes us there - to God – to Heaven.

## **2. A Language of Conviction**

Those who speak the language of Canaan speak with conviction. In Joshua 24, the patriarch for whom the book is named speaks of how God brought Israel from Egypt and bondage, through the Red Sea, the oppositions of the heathen and now here they are in the Promised Land, also called Canaan. He speaks these words of conviction: “*And if it seem evil unto you to serve the LORD, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.*” (Joshua 24:15). We have those words: “...*as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD*” on a plaque near the door of our house and now those words are inscribed on a stone just in front of our door. Our goal is to live in spiritual Canaan and bring and keep our family there.

Satan and this world are not friends to God and His people. He, like Pharaoh of old, wants to keep God’s people under Egyptian bondage. God, on the other hand, wants you in His land or better phrased, in His will. When Israel became a nation again in 1948 certain guidelines were enforced. One of the rules would be they would speak Hebrew. It was determined that even Yiddish would not be taught to the Israeli youth. If I may speculate, I would say for two reasons, first of all it is the language of the Jew. Since there was a re-establishment of the Jewish nation it is important to go back to their roots. Secondly, Yiddish is originally a German dialect with words from Hebrew and several modern languages. I can see the desire to not speak the language that their one-time captors (Nazis) spoke. In other words, we are in Israel, let us speak the language. I am reminded, “*Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not*” (I John 3:1). Therefore, “*Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him*” (I John 2:15). Billy Sunday said, “You can’t love flowers unless you hate weeds and you can’t love Jesus unless you hate sin.” For us to maintain freedom to do His will, we must speak the language of Heaven with conviction. As a young preacher I was warned, “Now don’t be so heavenly minded you are of no earthly good.” I would remind us to the contrary, let us not be so earthly minded we are of no heavenly good.

## **3. A Language of Love**

We touched on it with the above quote from I John 3:1, *Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God...*” Jesus said, “*As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you: continue ye in my love*” (John 15:9). The language of Canaan is the language of love. It is God’s love for the world that He desires to save and bring to Heaven. It is God’s love expressed to and through one another. When you hear it, you know it. I can hear people talk and often guess if they are from New England, the Mid-west or South. Peter was recognized as a disciple of the Lord because he was told, “... *Surely thou also art one of them; for thy speech bewrayeth thee*” (Matthew 26:73). The word “bewrayeth” means to “disclose, declare, make known, show.” Our speech declares who we are and where we are from. When I hear the Christian language of love, I often recognize it.

Honey captures more bees than vinegar. Canaan, the land of milk and honey should sweetly season our witness to our family, the Church and the world that needs Jesus.

- Pastor Pope

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