

“Banned Books and the Bible: ‘The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn’”

John 1:1-5

In the beginning, there was the Word; the Word was in God’s presence, and the Word was God. The Word was present to God from the beginning. Through the Word all things came into being, and apart from the Word nothing came into being that has come into being. In the Word was life, and that life was humanity’s light— a Light that shines in the darkness, a Light that the darkness has never overtaken.

John 15:7-14,17

If you live on in me, and my words live on in you, ask whatever you want and it will be done for you. My Abba will be glorified if you bear much fruit and thus prove to be my disciples. As my Abba has loved me, so have I loved you. Live on in my love. And you will live on in my love if you keep my commandments, just as I live on in Abba God’s love and have kept God’s commandments. I tell you all this that my joy may be yours, and your joy may be complete. This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you. **There is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.**

And you are my friends, if you do what I command you...This command I give you: that you love one another.

“There is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” Remember these words.

Remember these words as well: **“In the beginning, there was the Word; the Word was in God’s presence, and the Word was God.”**

As I said when we began this sermon series on “Banned Books and the Bible,” that strung together, the Word becomes a story. It is a sacred story, in which the Word is present, not just in the Bible, but in all stories.

The late Eli Wiesel said: **“God created human beings because God loves stories.”**

Writer, Charlie Fink adds: **“Stories are how we make sense of our lives and of the world.”**

Stories are how we communicate with others. Stories help us process what has happened and is happening in our lives and the world. They help to shape us as individuals, as a community and as people of faith.

Stories, in their many forms, help us understand the meaning of life and death and grief we all experience.

Stories show us what kindness, compassion, mercy, justice and love look like in the lives of other people, and therefore, in our own lives.

Stories also reveal to us our human fallibility, our brokenness, and pain. They reveal to us the evil and violence and harm we can do to one another, while lifting up our need for forgiveness, grace, mercy, reconciliation, and healing.

In short, stories tell us what it means to be fully human.

Each of the books in this sermon series have invited us to consider more fully what it means to be humans created in God's own image.

So it baffles me as to why some people want to "ban" books written about what it means to be a human being?

Yet, ever since stories have been told and then written down, some people have sought to ban them from being shared with others because they are somehow offended by another person's story.

Take for instance, Mark Twain's great American classic "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" which Ernest Hemingway said: **"All modern literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called Huckleberry Finn. American writing came from that. There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since."**

T.S. Elliot said of Huck Finn's character: **"...we come to see Huck himself in the end as... not unworthy to take a place with Ulysses, Faust, Don Quixote, Don Juan and Hamlet and other great discoveries that humans have made about themselves."** (Adapted)

Yet, as soon as Samuel Clemens published 'The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn' under his pen name, Mark Twain, the book was banned every year since its publication.

Writing in *The First Amendment Encyclopedia*, Elizabeth R. Purdy said: **"Some Americans did not view Huck as a positive role model for young readers. He scratched when he itched and said 'sweat.' Immediately after publication, the book was banned on the recommendation of public commissioners in Concord, Massachusetts, who described it as racist, coarse, trashy, inelegant, irreligious, obsolete, inaccurate, and mindless."**

Racism and use of a particularly racially charged word is the number one reason 'Huckleberry Finn' has been and continues to be banned.

Yet, in spite of all the criticism, Twain's classic is a powerful story of human growth and moral development.

Professor Joseph Bentley, writing in his article "**Huck Finn Messes with Mr. In-Between**" says, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn isn't just a story about the adventures of a white boy and a black man who is an escaped slave, floating on a homemade raft down the Mississippi River. It is really a story of **"friendship, sacrifice, commitment, loyalty, trust, freedom, and especially about race and slavery. And in a deep and profound way, it is the quintessential American Story of people on the move, searching for a better life."**

I would add that it is also a story about discovering the sacred presence of Christ in another, and in doing so, faithfully living into Jesus' words: **"There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends."**

Huck has his reason to take to the river, he is fleeing an abusive father. Jim, who is enslaved by Miss Watson, is seeking freedom from the tyranny of chattel slavery.

At first, Huck is really just seeking his own freedom, and mindful of his own best interests in the midst of their shared adventures. Yet, as the story unfolds, you begin to see growth in Huck as he comes to know Jim as a human being and a friend; someone he is willing to lay down his life for as Jim is willing to do for Huck.

However, that is not how the "Church" sees their relationship. Jim is not a human being. He is a piece of property, a slave, owned by Miss Watson. Huck is a thief who has stolen her property. "Thou shall not steal!"

In a pivotal moment in the story, Twain invites us into a spiritual and moral conflict Huck faces. What do we do when we feel the laws of a society and those of the "Church" say one thing, and Christ's commandment to love others calls us to go against those human laws? Which do you obey, knowing your eternal salvation depends on it, or so the Church has told you?

Two cons are seeking to return Jim to slavery. Huck wonders if he should do the same? **"His conscience begins to trouble him again. He cannot help but feel guilty for assisting Jim, despite the fact that his instincts constantly force him into that role. After trying to pray for resolution, Huck writes a letter to Miss Watson detailing where Jim is and signs it 'Huck Finn.' After he finishes the letter, he feels momentary relief and is confident that he has saved himself from going to hell for helping a slave."** (*Cliff Notes, Chapter 31, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*)

Huck attempts to do what we all do in these situations, he prays, or tries to pray.

"So I was full of trouble, full as I could be; and didn't know what to do. At last I had an idea; and I says, I'll go and write the letter – and then see if I can pray. Why, it was astonishing, the way I felt as light as a feather right

straight off, and my troubles all gone. So I got a piece of paper and a pencil, all glad and excited, and set down and wrote:

Miss Watson, your runaway (slave) Jim is down here two mile below Pikesville, and Mr. Phelps has got him and he will give him up for the reward if you send. HUCK FINN.

I felt good and all washed clean of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life, and I knowed I could pray now. But I didn't do it straight off, but laid the paper down and set there thinking – thinking how good it was all this happened so, and how near I come to being lost and going to hell. And went on thinking. And got to thinking over our trip down the river; and I see Jim before me all the time: in the day and in the night-time, sometimes moonlight, sometimes storms, and we a-floating along, talking and singing and laughing. But somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but only the other kind. I'd see him standing my watch on top of his'n, 'stead of calling me, so I could go on sleeping; and see him how glad he was when I come back out of the fog; and when I come to him again in the swamp, up there where the feud was; and such-like times; and would always call me honey, and pet me and do everything he could think of for me, and how good he always was; and at last I struck the time I saved him by telling the men we had small-pox aboard, and he was so grateful, and said I was the best friend old Jim ever had in the world, and the ONLY one he's got now; and then I happened to look around and see that paper.

It was a close place. I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a-trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself: "All right, then, I'll GO to hell" – and tore it up.

In this pivotal moment, we see Huck grow as a character. He sees the needs of the other, in this situation, Jim, and sets asides his own needs. He realizes he cannot betray his friend, and that is what Jim is to him, a friend who he has come to love and care for as a human being. So Huck chooses to do the Christ-like thing; he tears up the letter and sacrifices his own salvation and life to save Jim.

By applying his own conscience and beliefs, Huck grows as a character and is able to form his own opinions and not blindly accept society's values and the status quo.

Someone said to me that they just want to come to church to hear the "Word of God" and not about books.

Yet, in each of these books, the Word of God is present, if only like Huck, we find it within ourselves to be open to that discovery.

At the beginning of this series and in this sermon, I said to remember - **"In the beginning, there was the Word; the Word was in God's presence, and the Word was God."**

The writer of John also reminds us **“Through the Word all things came into being, and apart from the Word nothing came into being that has come into being. In the Word was life, and that life was humanity’s light— a Light that shines in the darkness, a Light that the darkness has never overtaken.”**

When anyone, any school board, any parent group, any elected political leader on any level of government, or any religious leader or church, seeks to “ban” any book, they are seeking to ban God’s Word that lives in each human being, and in the stories we tell through the Word we share in these books and so many others.

I am grateful for Mark Twain’s character Huck Finn, who showed us that one must have the courage to risk their life for the sake of another, or for the sake of another’s story told in book form.

As followers of Jesus, the Word made flesh, we should all have such love for others that we would choose hell rather than ban anyone’s story.

Amen.