

Sermon for June 11, 2017 – “Very Last Words”

Trinity Sunday, Year A – Text: Matthew 28:16-20

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It’s not just coincidence that Jesus’ very last words in Matthew’s gospel are what they are. Last words tend to carry extra weight. And, studies show the easiest things to remember are those that come either first or last in a sequence. You can pretty much forget about the middle. By that logic, I could wrap up this sermon now with a cute story and we could all go home. If you’re like the average church attender in this country the main point of my sermon won’t matter, but if I end my sermon with some inspirational story or with all the fire and brimstone of the famous sermon by Jonathan Edwards, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”, you’re more likely to remember it. For a little while anyway. As it is most of you know by now that when you hear the words “here’s the thing” you know that I’m coming to the end of the sermon. Some of you have told me that when I say that you perk up your ears. So, you see, last words are memorable – especially if you’re famous.

Here are some examples...

- Jack Daniel: “One last drink, please.”
- L. Frank Baum: “Now I can cross the shifting sand.”
- Oscar Wilde: “My wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. One or the other of us has to go.”
- Karl Marx: “Go on, get out! Last words are for fools who haven’t said enough!”
- Steve Jobs: “Oh, wow!”
- Nostradamus: “Tomorrow, at sunrise, I shall no longer be here.”
- Alfred Hitchcock: “One never knows the ending. One has to die to know exactly what happens after death, although Catholics have their hopes.”
- Kit Carson: “I just wish I had time for one more bowl of chili.”

But seriously, when we think that something we’re about to say or do will be the very last thing we say or do...Don’t we usually tend to value it more? In my years in ministry I’ve seen this play out frequently. People want their final words to mean something lasting, to encapsulate their love in a way that endures beyond the grave. Last words are important at other times too, not just at death. Before a long trip, maybe. Or a new season of life.

In his final appearance to His disciples before ascending into heaven, Jesus sends a different sort of message. A two-part message, really; part command, part promise and assurance. First, a command that issues from Jesus’ authority over all heaven and all earth. He tells His disciples to: **“Go and make disciples of all nations...“Baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...“And teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”** We know it as the “Great Commission.” This Great Commission is a command that’s been played and replayed by the church across the centuries, so much so that while we might not **forget** these famous words from our Lord we can easily overlook how **terrifying** they would’ve been to hear in their original context. To contextualize that terror a bit more, let’s recap. Let’s see what’s happened to the disciples leading up to this moment. A strange man shows up one day, a prophet and teacher of some sort. He has this other-worldly authority to do all sorts of miracles. He also has a knack for irritating the religious establishment.

This guy shows up one day and He calls them to leave everything and follow Him. The disciples literally do just that and, in the process are transformed. They listen to His teaching and preaching. They witness a great many things, miracles chief among them. But just when they've come around to believing that Jesus is, in fact, their Messiah – the Savior of their people, He winds up dead on a cross. Fearing for their own lives they run and hide only to discover three days later that their Messiah's **not** dead but alive and, in fact, rose from the dead and is very likely what He said He was – namely the Son of God! Understandably, such events could be discombobulating, even traumatic for the average person. (And Scripture suggests that Jesus chose very average, maybe even below-average, people to follow Him.) Now, put yourselves in their shoes, okay, sandals for a moment. Imagine having just gone through all that, this Messiah, this Son of God, now tells you and rest of the group that He's leaving. Oh, and by the way, He needs you to carry on for Him. He needs you to go everywhere, literally to the ends of the earth, to tell His story. That'd do more than just give you pause wouldn't it? Wait, you want us to do what, now? Assuming you could even get your mind around what you were being asked to do you'd probably think twice, right? You'd at least ask a few questions! Um, Jesus, is there a manual for this baptism and teaching stuff? Oh, and Jesus, what's a Holy Spirit, anyway? There'd be plenty of questions. The most fundamental of which probably would be this one...“Why exactly are we standing here on this mountain now saying goodbye to our Messiah?”

All this is why I'm grateful for those three little words that precedes Jesus' command. Those three little words? “But some doubted.” And I'll say it right now if this were me I'd have been among them...the doubters I mean. With a big, open-mouthed look of wonder that the guy who'd been my saving hope, my **only** hope, was now taking off into the wild blue yonder! It seems that no sooner had the Messianic party started that the host and the star of the party takes off! The Messiah's new triumphant order of things is just starting to settle in when – bing! – Jesus presses the elevator button leaving me behind. Here I am left to deal with the chief priests, angry mobs, and Roman tribunals, all of whom would just as soon have my head on a platter. Frankly, that kind of ending sounds anti-climactic if you ask me. So, I can readily imagine that for the first disciples, or at least for some of them, Jesus' Great Commission could have sounded a whole lot more like: “Gotta run, but keep the party going for me!” Or worse, “It's been fun...Oh, and don't forget about those dirty dishes!”

So, maybe today Jesus' “Great Commission” still sounds a bit like clean-up duty for many of us. Or busy work. In a day and age when so many people are leaving church and not looking back, when churches everywhere are dwindling or closing their doors, when we ourselves are among the doubters. In all of this how can we, if we're in any way, shape, or form **honest** with ourselves, not be humbled by a certain sense of our own failure? How can we not see how very much like those first disciples, now called on to be apostles, we are? Seriously...Baptizing people in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit? Teaching them to obey all God's commands? These are **not** small, inconsequential requests. This “Great Commission” to which Jesus entrusts us carries a great responsibility, one of bearing witness to the whole world the story of God's love. Baptism in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, that whole “Trinitarian formula” thing. It's about more than sprinkling a few drops of water on someone, or for that matter, a full dunk. When baptizing infants it's not about protecting them in the event something happens to them, with adults it's not some initiation ritual like joining a fraternity or sorority (Although it is to some extent about belonging to something...), it's about so much more...especially in the context of the Great Commission!

We don't have enough time to get into all of it, but simply stated, it's about covenantal love. It's about identity, knowing who we are and whose we are.

It's about letting God's love work in and through us in the places in which we find ourselves or the places to which we're sent. And that love? That **covenantal** love? What's **that** all about? It's the same love that bleeds through every line of Jesus' story. It's the same love that the doctrine of the Trinity seeks to describe. It's the most unique, truest love there is. It's love that does not, in human terms, come easily. That's because it's a **sacrificial** love. A love puts others first. A love that's not afraid to die for another, or in Jesus' case, the whole world. It's a love that isn't afraid in this age of political correctness to state without hesitation that it's lavishly and foolishly, **for** us and for the entire world God created.

How good, I would ask, are we at doing this? How good are we at letting God's love work through us? This "Great Commission" thing...How good are we at living that out? Let's admit it, most of the time, don't we prefer to stay in our comfort zones? Don't we avoid, whenever possible, taking a risk that might help us grow spiritually? Don't we tend to judge others rather than love them? Don't we choose the safety of self-righteousness over the adventure of learning from another human being? Don't we fight over the small things avoiding bigger matters like social justice? Don't we cling to our money and time as possessions rather than give them away recognizing that they weren't really ours to begin with? Trouble is – we're human! We simply lack the ability to follow Jesus or obey His commands on our own or under our own power. When left to our own devices we're like the first disciples, we quickly desert anything that remotely resembles the love of God in Christ Jesus. Which is why we so desperately need the second part of Jesus' parting message which are, technically and thankfully, Jesus' **very** last words; "**And remember, I am with you always...“To the end of the age.”** Will we doubt? We might... Will we stumble? Possibly... Will we will fail? Maybe... But, and here brothers and sisters is the thing, **The Great Commission,**" wrote missionary J. Hudson Taylor "**is not an option to be considered – it is a command to be obeyed.**" But Jesus' command here ultimately does not depend on us or on our success, faithfulness in obedience is its own reward. Because nowhere in the Great Commission does it say we're to convert anyone. We're not required to "win souls" for anyone. That's God's job – not ours! We're "merely" commanded to "go and make disciples..." We're to "baptize" and "teach" them...We're to plant the seed, water it, nourish it, provide the right conditions for growth. It is only God, as Paul reminds the Corinthians, who gives the growth. Disciple-making is part and parcel to Christian fellowship and every believer – all of us, indwelt by God's Spirit – can be a channel of God's grace to another. Which means good disciple-making is always a two-way street. And fundamentally, **both** "discipler" and the "disciple(e)", teacher and learner, are disciples of Jesus.

So, as Christian author Stephen Smallman writes: "Our involvement in making disciples will be one of the most significant things we can do for **our own** growth as disciples. "It's like any pursuit; we learn better as we teach it to others." So, if we're to grow spiritually and as I said last week we are, we must be willing to help others do the same. And this isn't limited to Sundays, nor is it limited to the church. It can happen with anyone, anytime, anywhere. It can happen with people that we've known for a long time or the strangers we run into in the checkout line at Kroger. I'll say it again..."**The Great Commission is not an option to be considered...“It is a command to be obeyed.”** It's our job to bear witness with our lives to God's love. It's our job, to paraphrase Francis of Assisi, to preach the gospel if necessary, using words, and remembering that Jesus is with us always to the end of the age!

Thanks be to God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen and amen.