

Last Words (Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; I John 5:9-13; John 17:6-19)

The last words of the great showman B.T. Barnum (d. 1891) were, "How were the receipts today at Madison Square Garden?" Actress Tallulah Bankhead's last words (d. December 12, 1968) were, "Codeine...bourbon." Actor Humphrey Bogart's last words (d. January 14, 1957) were similar. He said, "I should never have switched from Scotch to Martinis." Beethoven's last words (d. March 26, 1827)? "Friends, applaud; the comedy is finished." Before slipping into a coma and dying nine days later (d. January 24, 1965), Winston Churchill said, "I'm bored with it all." And right before he died, Actor John Barrymore said (d. May 29, 1942), "Die? I should say not, dear fellow. No Barrymore would allow such a conventional thing to happen to him."

It's interesting to hear the last words of someone, isn't it? Last words reveal a great deal, I think, about a person's character. So let's listen to just a few others, maybe some that are a little more inspirational than asking about money or alcohol or saying you're too special to die.

US President John Quincy Adams (d. February 21, 1848): "This is the last of earth! I am content."

Writer Joseph Addison (d. June 17, 1719): "See in what peace a Christian can die."□

Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas à Becket (d. 1170): "I am ready to die for my Lord, that in my blood the Church may obtain liberty and peace."□

Preacher Henry Ward Beecher (d. March 8, 1887): "Now comes the mystery."

US President Grover Cleveland (d. 1908): "I have tried so hard to do the right."

Inventor Thomas Edison (d. October 18, 1931): "It is very beautiful over there."

Elizabeth I, Queen of England (d. 1603): "All my possessions for a moment of time."

Poet Heinrich Heine (d. February 15, 1856): "God will pardon me--that's his line of work."

US President Andrew Jackson (d. 1845): "Oh, do not cry. Be good children, and we will all meet in heaven."

Writer Thomas Hobbes (d. 1679): "I am about to take my last voyage, a great leap in the dark."

Louis XIV, King of France (d. 1715): "Why do you weep? Did you think I was immortal?"

In our gospel lesson for today, the Gospel Writer John gives us some of the last words Jesus spoke. And even though Jesus would later that night be arrested and then executed, his thoughts were not on himself but rather on his disciples, those in the present and those to come. After telling his disciples that "the hour" had come, apparently, in their presence, Jesus prayed what has become known as the High Priestly Prayer, for in this prayer, Jesus prayed as a priest on behalf of his disciples. Jesus' last words in the Upper Room represent his last will and testimony to us. They reveal the depth of his love for us. They are actually a gift in which he lays out guidelines for the living of our lives. Some day, memorial candles will be lit for us. And so how can we wisely live the time we have on this earth?

First, Jesus made it clear that we have been given words to guide us. Jesus said to God, "the words that you have to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you" (17:8). Friends, how well we ought to know the parables and the words of our Lord! If we are to live by them, we must *know* them, right? So that when we're tempted to hold a grudge, we remember Jesus' words to "turn the other cheek," or to leave our gift for God at the altar and go and reconcile with the person with whom we are at odds. So that when someone has wronged us, we remember the story of the Prodigal Son and instead of coldly holding back and teaching the person "a lesson," we show unabashed welcome and pardon. So that when we find it difficult to forgive someone, we remember Jesus' words from the cross: "Father, forgive them." Yes, we must know Jesus' words.

Second, in High Priestly Prayer, Jesus made it clear that we have God's

protection. Jesus prayed first of all that we be protected from impulses and forces that might seek to divide us. He prayed, "protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one" (17:11). One of the reasons we come to church is that there is protection in our unity here. When we don't come to church, when we break the ties that bind us to one another, we become much more vulnerable to our own lesser impulses as well as to suggestions from others out in the world. Jesus also specifically prayed, "protect them from the evil one." Whether or not we believe in the devil, we would all have to agree that evil is real. There are evil ones who tempt us and try to get us to do what they do. How much better for us and our children and our grandchildren to spend time in unity with other Christians. We're not perfect here in the church, but at least we're trying to live lives according to the words of our Lord.

Third, our lives should be full of joy. We sometimes confuse the suffering Jesus did with his intention for us. And while it's true that Jesus said we must love to the point of being willing to suffer and sacrifice for others, aside from this, Jesus wants our lives to be full of joy. Jesus prayed, "I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves" (17:13). Some translations read "so that they may have my joy made complete among themselves." Living according to Jesus' words, living protected lives in unity with one another, is not a burdensome thing. It's a blessing--something to give us joy. If we feel like we "have" to come to church or if we've made our children and grandchildren feel this way, then we're not doing something right. When others see us, they should see joy. What's that song? "I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart!" Amen!

Fourth, while the word of God and living as part of a group trying to follow the word of God will give us joy, the world will hate us for this same word of God. We need to expect this. Jesus prayed, "I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world" (17:14). Psychologists may have "a field day" with why this is true, but we've all experienced its truth. When our oldest child was in middle school, he began hanging out with a boy whose parents were, according to worldly standards, extremely successful. But the parents never had time for the boy. In fact, we took him to all 14 baseball games that summer that he and our son played in, and, if I remember correctly, the boy's parents came late to one game. And after every game, we treated

the boy to Godfather's Pizza. The boy loved being with us, and yet, he did everything he could to sabotage our family. He'd lie about our other children, in an effort to make himself look better. He seemed to love us and yet at the same time hate us for what our family represented that he didn't have. So, we need to expect this sort of thing, be cautious about it, and yet certainly not let it deter us from continuing to show even those who seemingly "hate" us the way God would have us live as individuals and as families.

Fifth, Jesus prayed "they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one" (17:15). A little later on, Jesus added, "I have sent them into the world" (17:18). For us Christians, there's a tension that exists--the tension between being in this world yet not of it. This tension has sometimes led Christians to withdraw from the world. We've seen this with the monastic movement, the Amish, the Mormons. Nonetheless, Jesus sent his disciples *into* the world.

Knowing Jesus' words, strengthened and protected by our unity with one another, we're to live *in* the world. That's where the darkness is. That's where the light of God is most needed to dispel the darkness. We're to shine God's Light of love, bring in his kingdom, by taking his ministries of compassion, forgiveness, justice, peace, and hope *into* the world--feeding the hungry and giving drink to the thirsty, visiting the sick and the imprisoned, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, speaking out against injustice.

While appreciating the beauty and goodness of God we find in the world, we're to constantly be on the lookout for the dark spots in the world, and we're to feel compelled to do something about those dark spots. Thus, on God's behalf, like the prophets of old, we are not only to comfort the afflicted but also to afflict the comfortable. We're to challenge the world.

And, of course, challenging the status quo can be dangerous. If we not only feed the hungry but begin asking *why* we have to have hungry people, we might be seen as a threat to some of the earthly powers that be. Some of our own family and friends might even get upset with us for "rocking the boat." Dom Helder Camara, the late Archbishop of Brazil, was criticized and

threatened for his work with the poor and outcasts. He commented, "If I feed the hungry, I am a saint. If I ask why they are hungry, I am a communist." In answering Jesus' call to take *God's Light into* the world, we too may come to know rejection by the world.

In his book *Reinventing Evangelism* (1989), Donald Posterski wrote, "The tragedy of the modern church is that Jesus' strategy for penetrating the culture with the good news of the gospel has been reversed. Instead of being in the world but not of the world, too many of *God's* committed people are *of* the world but not *in* the world. They have been both captured and intimidated by the culture. They have been seduced by the world and have adopted the world's ways as their own—they are 'of' the world. They have succumbed to social segregation—they are not 'in' the world." This is the problem of too many of our churches. "Modern Christianity" is more "modern" than it is "Christian." Herein lies another danger of being in the world.

Sixth, nonetheless, we can take comfort, strength, and encouragement in knowing that *God* has blessed us, commissioned us, set us apart, empowered us to do his holy work, for Jesus prayed to *God*, "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth" (17:17). When we start to feel too comfortable in this world, we need to begin to worry. If no one thinks our lives are extraordinary or different because we are Christians, we need to begin to worry. When we don't get questions about why we're different from others, we need to begin to worry. People should notice and talk about how different we are from the way we use to be or from others around us. I have heard it said that what it means to be sanctified is that you become a holy person--and not just h-o-l-y but also h-o-l-e-y--so that we have holes in our lives through which others can see *God* and his grace.

Ah. Someday when someone lights memorial candles for us, may they say that we proved worthy of Jesus' last words for us in his High Priestly prayer. May it be said that we knew the word of *God*; that we lived according to the word of *God*; that we lived our lives in unity with *God's* church, knowing the protection and encouragement of such; that our lives were full of joy; that we were true to *God*, even when it meant incurring the world's hatred; that we lived in the world while not being of the world; and that our lives were different from the lives of most people, in that our lives were

sanctified, holy lives through which others could glimpse *God* and his love.
Amen.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; May 24, 2009
(Memorial Sunday)