

Famous Last Words

A Sermon Preached by
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All these are the twelve tribes of Israel, and this is what their father said to them when he blessed them, blessing each one of them with a suitable blessing. Then [Jacob] charged them, saying to them, "I am about to be gathered to my people. Bury me with my ancestors--in the cave in the field of Ephron the Hittite, in the cave in the field at Machpelah, near Mamre, in the land of Canaan, in the field that Abraham bought from Ephron the Hittite as a burial site. There Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried; there Isaac and his wife Rebekah were buried; and there I buried Leah-- the field and the cave that is in it were purchased from the Hittite." When Jacob ended his charge to his sons, he drew up his feet into the bed, breathed his last, and was gathered to his people.

Genesis 49:28-33 NRSV

Long after we die some of us will be remembered for our deeds or misdeeds. Some will be remembered for our relationships and personal character. And some of us will be remembered for our last words.

What would *you* like to be remembered for?

When it comes to being remembered for *last words*, it helps if you're famous at the time of your death. Some of us better start getting busy.

Some last words are unintentionally profound. Lady Nancy Astor woke briefly during her last illness and found all her family around her bedside. She asked, "Am I dying or is this my birthday?" Not a bad way to think about death from a Christian perspective.

Some last words are defiant. A doctor tried to prepare Revolutionary War Hero, Ethan Allen, for death saying, "General, I fear the angels are waiting for you." Allen responded, "Waiting are they? Well--let 'em wait."

Some last words are sadly mistaken. Civil War General John Sedgwick was killed in battle while reassuring his troops, "They couldn't hit an elephant at this dist. . . ."

Some last words reflect the simple human desire to be remembered, for anything. Mexican revolutionary, Pancho Villa, struggling to find the right words on his death bed, said, "Don't let it end like this. Tell them I said something."

What would you like to be your last message to the world? Words of wisdom? Words of blessing? Words of encouragement?

Jesus had at least two sets of "last words." Many of us can recall his words on Good Friday:

"Father, forgive them." Lk. 23: 34.

"Today, you will be with me in paradise." Lk. 23: 43

"Woman, behold your son." Jn. 19: 26-7

"My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Mk. 15: 34 (Mt. 27: 46)

"I thirst." Jn. 19: 28.

"It is finished." Jn 19: 30

"Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit." Lk. 23:

In these words we can hear Jesus' complete divinity and his thorough humanity. Like any of us might, he speaks of his desperate thirst and his even deeper longing for his Father's comfort. Then, he provides for his mother by asking John to care for her. Finally, he offers divine forgiveness, promises a stranger heavenly paradise, and offers himself to the One who sent him.

After his resurrection Jesus spoke another set of last words, offered to the disciples right before his ascension. Those words are today's second lesson:

Then [Jesus] said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you--that everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Luke 24:44-53 NRSV

I am sure that Jesus chose his last words thoughtfully and prayerfully. In *these* last words Jesus gives specific instructions to the disciples, blesses them, and promises them his Holy Spirit. Jesus knew his last words would matter both to the disciples and to posterity.

Mortals' last words matter, too. We can see this from our first scripture lesson today. Just before the Old Testament patriarch Jacob died, he gathered his sons together and spoke to each of them, specifically, about their futures. This was part of the ancient Jewish practice of giving children deathbed blessings. Remember how Jacob himself had craved his father Isaac's blessing when Isaac was dying? Jacob was the one who was so desperate for it that he tricked his father into giving it to him. Now Jacob is freely giving a special blessing to *all* of his sons.

Some of us never get to hear words of blessing from our parents. A new biography of George Steinbrenner, the tyrannical owner of the Yankees, quotes one of Steinbrenner's friends saying, "He'd have given up all his

championship rings just to have gotten an ... ‘I love you, son’ from [his] old man.” No wonder he was so driven to win at all costs.

A very different kind of baseball legend, Tigers’ radio announcer Ernie Harwell, died last week. Harwell was one of the most faithful guys in the game. He said goodbye to his fans almost ten years ago, and the phrase that he repeated most often throughout his farewell speech was, “Thank you.” Harwell’s gracious and generous spirit is part of what he’ll always be remembered for.

“Last words” can be very powerful. So why do we give so little thought to what our own “last words” might be? When I began in ministry a gruff older pastor counseled me, “A preacher needs to be ready to preach, pray, or die at a moment’s notice.” At the time, the thought of having to do any of those three, even with a lot of notice, was pretty intimidating. But he was right. In ministry, and in life, God doesn’t give us tomorrow. He needs us right now. Tomorrow may be too late. That pastor was trying to encourage me – and I’m trying to encourage all of us – to get our houses in order so that when the time comes our last words won’t be, “Just give me a second, I’m not quite ready....”

Of course the most important thing we can do is offer our hearts to God. Only God’s grace can prepare us for eternity. If we don’t do that, nothing else matters. Once we’ve done that, there are three more important steps we can take.

First, let’s plan our funeral arrangements *now*. Doesn’t that sound like a lot of fun on a Sunday afternoon? But if not today, when?

Pre-planning your funeral is one of the most loving and faithful things we can do for our families. But as much as we love our families and would hate to burden them when we die, I know full well that most of us aren’t going to rush home to fill out one of the yellow funeral planning worksheets found in your bulletin today.

That’s because some of us are thinking that we’ve got plenty of time. We *probably* do, but we may not. Jennifer and I have done way too many funerals for people who thought they had plenty of time to say goodbye, to tell people they love them, to put some words on paper. They were wrong.

As sad and tragic as sudden deaths are, we can take some of the sting out of an untimely death by leaving funeral instructions for our loved ones. Those last words, chosen with care and prayer, can be blessed guides to survivors who are lost in grief. What a gift to be able to sing a person's favorite hymn or recite a beloved scripture at a memorial service; knowing that this is what the person wanted makes everyone feel a little bit better.

Be as specific as you can. Did you notice how in our first lesson Jacob told his sons exactly where to bury him? Following his example, I've begun to share with Kari my hopes for the dimensions of the pyramid I'd like built in my honor... In fact, if I were to die tomorrow, I'd want my ashes to be buried right here, in our memorial garden, alongside my brothers and sisters in Christ. That kind of detail helps survivors who sometimes anguish over whether they made the right decisions at the time of death.

If you return your worksheet to the church office we'll put it in a confidential file so that it will be there when you need it. You can change it at any time, of course. We've already got several dozen forms, but we're hoping more people will turn theirs in. But I'm not counting on a 100% response.

The second reason people don't fill out forms like these is because it's awkward and uncomfortable. We don't like thinking about death, much less talking about it, especially our *own* death. But we need to do it anyway. It's part of being responsible and truly loving. A little trouble now will spare our families and friends much grief later. Jesus made a point of preparing the disciples for his death – he told them it was coming several times -- and he promised them his peace when it came.

Planning a funeral needn't be a morbid exercise for people of faith. If you do it long before you think you'll need it, it can be a time of reflection, storytelling, and laughter. If you need help getting started, please talk to me or Pastor Jennifer, and we would be glad to walk you through it. You might even find that planning your own funeral gives new purpose and focus to your days. It's one way we can take up our crosses each day; it's living with the eternity in mind.

The second thing we can do to get our houses in order is become intentional about blessing and forgiving people. Ask yourself, "If I were to die tomorrow, who might not know that I loved them?" Make a list of

names. And don't assume that just because you live with a person or do nice things for them they know how you really feel about them. Even adult children crave to hear words of affirmation and encouragement from their parents. Siblings do, too. We can never bless them enough.

Words of forgiveness are especially important. Imagine what it meant to the disciples to know that Jesus had forgiven them – in advance -- for deserting him. It meant that when he finally ascended to Heaven they were filled with *joy* instead of *guilt*. Perhaps there's someone you can reconcile with today, before it's too late. We can't control how our last words – spoken or written – will be received when they are offered, but they will be a gift nonetheless.

The third thing we can do is leave a will. I'm not talking about a traditional "Last Will and Testament." We should all have one of those, of course, and, if you're able, please consider including the Generations Fund in your planning. Kari and I are taking steps to do just that.

I'm talking about a very different kind of will today. In the middle ages certain circles of Jewish people made it a practice to create for their children something now commonly called an "ethical will." Think of it as a love letter to your family. An ethical will doesn't say who gets what, it is the voice of one generation speaking to another. The "last words" we see in the Bible are essentially this kind of will.

Older ethical wills contained burial instructions, blessings, and lists of personal and spiritual values. Modern ones often talk of these things as well as a person's hopes and dreams, loves, and personal history. The practice of leaving an ethical will is coming back into vogue across religious lines.

Each ethical will is unique. It can be as simple as a parent writing to his newborn child a letter that will be opened years later – when that child graduates or gets married or when the parent dies. Here are a few excerpts from an example I found on the internet, written by a mother to her daughters:

My dear girls: [T]here is much I want to pass on to you that is far more valuable than anything I could ever own. ... I hand you some of the guiding principles of ..., my ... life story, and hope that you weave them into your own.

- *Love yourselves, even the icky parts.*
- *Listen to the smallest voice inside yourself as soon as you hear it.*
- *Give equal attention to mind, body, and spirit.*
- *When something bad happens to you, try not to say, "Why me?" since that suggests it should have happened to someone else; better to ask, "Why anyone?"*

I love you more than language can accommodate, and I wish for each of you a life of ... peace, wholeness, completeness.

*Always,
Mom*

Simple words, but profound because of their sincerity. They may not mean much to us, but to that woman's girls they are indeed more precious than any item their mother could leave to them.

I wonder what a legacy of faith we could leave to those we love if each of us here this morning were to describe in a few simple sentences what knowing, loving, and serving Jesus Christ has meant to us. The effect on the generations that come after us might be astounding.

Imagine with me. It's just hours after your mother, or brother, or best friend has died. You're rooting around in their personal files for some important document and you come across an envelope with your name on it, like it was waiting for you all along. Inside the envelope you find words meant just for you. There are stories that you had never heard before. There are pleas for forgiveness and offers of grace. And it closes with, "I love you." Last words like these can make an impact, can't they?

We are in God's house this morning because we are working on getting our *spiritual* houses in order. It might be prudent to work on other parts of your "homes" at the same time. One minute after you die you won't be missing us; you'll be laughing face to face with God. But we'll be mourning you. You can ease our pain – and truly help us to remember you with joy – by writing some famous – *and faithful* -- last words today. Amen.

Dear Friend,

I hope you have been blessed by this message. You can request a free audio-tape or CD recording of this sermon by contacting the church office. We also have a complete sermon archive (including audio-files and PDFs) on-line at www.GrowWithSecond.org/sermons

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