

"LAST WORDS"

A Sermon By

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106 East 86th Street
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April 27, 1997

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INTRODUCTION

A lawyer was doing his best to console a widow whose husband had passed away without a will. The lawyer asked her,

"Did your deceased husband have any last words?" "You mean before he died?" sobbed the bereaved widow. "Yes...right before he died" replied the lawyer...."They might be helpful if it's not too painful for you to recall". "Well...as I remember it, he said....'Don't try to scare me! You couldn't hit the broad side of a barn with that gun!..."

Collections have been made of the last words of well-known people. I came across a collection of last words recently from people who are not that well-known. For example, murderer Richard Loeb was a trifle optimistic about his survival after being stabbed 56 times by a fellow convict in 1936. He said, "I think....I think I'm going to make it!" Those were his last words.

And legendary "Swashbuckler Douglas Fairbanks" must have been confused before giving up the ghost in 1939 because his famous last words were "I never felt better". William Palmer who was hanged in 1856 was told to step on the scaffold trap door. "Is it safe?" were his last words. And finally, Phineas T. Barnum, the outrageous showman, asked a question with his last words, too...."How were the receipts today at Madison Square Garden?" They're still asking that one...

DEVELOPMENT

Consider the last words of Jesus, as recorded in today's Scripture reading. Luke tells us that Jesus opened the minds of His disciples to understand the Scriptures and then said to them,

"Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. Behold, I send the promise of My Father upon you, but stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high". (Luke 24: 49)

According to Luke, these were the last words of Jesus and these undoubtedly were the words that Christ meant for His disciples to remember...words that summed up His mission and theirs, too. It's interesting to me to consider what part of His ministry He chose to emphasize with these "last words" of His. For without this passage, we might be tempted to assume that His final message to the Twelve would be, "love one another".

We talk about the love of Christ just about every Sunday in our churches and obviously, no one loved like Jesus and He taught love as the "central ethic" of life, but that was not the message He centered on in His last instructions to His followers. It's important for us to see this. I think if we preach only the love of Christ, people on the outside looking in might think that the Gospel is a "touchy-feely....everybody have a warm feeling about everybody else" kind of message with no real power to transform lives.

Now...love is at the center of our message, but it is not the complete message. There is something more. Take another look at the Biblical text.

REPENTANCE AND FORGIVENESS

"Thus it is written....that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead....and that REPENTANCE and FORGIVENESS should be preached in His name to all nations."

Here is the message that we are to "lift up" and proclaim out there to a waiting world. Repent and receive God's forgiveness. ~~Let me repeat this in case you missed it: this is the central task of the Church....to say to people repent and receive forgiveness.~~

A bit of Bible study along the way. Remember how at the beginning of the New Testament we encounter John the Baptist preaching a message of repentance. It is a very stark message, unrelenting. Let's take a moment to paint a contrast between John and Jesus. John was something of the rough-hewn backwoodsman, while Jesus was a more urbane rabbi. John was hard. Jesus was soft. John preached repentance. Jesus preached grace. However, the historical evidence does not support such a one-sided position. For Jesus, in His preaching, was just as demanding....sometimes even more demanding than John. Remember how he said,

"Lest your righteousness EXCEED that of the Pharisees"

At His baptism Jesus identified Himself with John's message of repentance. It was a consistent theme throughout His ministry....but He also preached forgiveness.

~~He also preached forgiveness.~~ In fact, He was bold enough to say to one man, "Your sins are forgiven". And that really steamed up that Temple gathering....that He should claim authority to forgive sins. But that was the second part of His overall message.

Repent and receive forgiveness for your sins, and that is the central message that He would have the Church proclaim to a waiting world. ~~Repent and receive God's forgiveness.~~ However, since these two words have lost much of their power, much of their appeal, much of their zing for modern day folk, let's rephrase them and think about them in a different way and see where it goes.

WHAT DIRECTION IS YOUR LIFE HEADED? Start with repentance...with that feeling of regret for what one has done or failed to do. The first message we proclaim from Christ is this: in what direction is your life headed? Everyone's life has a direction...and sometimes that direction is not desirable.

For example, from time to time we encounter someone who is becoming more and more bitter with every day that passes. We've all known people like that. Somewhere along the way something has caused them to "sour" on life. And rather than seeing the folly of such a depressing attitude....rather than acknowledging that they ought to do something about their outlook before it drives everyone away from them....they seem to nurture that negative attitude and it ever more tightly pulls them into its grasp. It's "turn-off" and we want to say to such a person, "Come on...turn around....turn around before it's too late...before you blow it all!" We see people abusing these wonderful bodies God has given each of us - with alcohol, with cigarettes, with drugs, or with simple gluttony or neglect or lack of responsibility and we want to say, "Turn around, friend...turn around while you still can....before it's too late and you crash."

Let me throw out another example. A man finds himself being drawn into a relationship that is destructive to his happy home. He is on a path that will certainly mean heartache for himself, for his wife and kids, even for his partner in this irresponsible behavior, and perhaps we want to shout,

"Walk away from it, friend...for God's sake,
man...turn around...before it's too late!"

We see people who, lacking any other great motivation in life, begin to surround themselves with "things"...at the expense of living a life of service and we want to say,

"Turn around. You are serving 'things' rather
than allowing 'things' to serve you. For your
own spiritual welfare....turn around...."

You see, this message of repentance is not the exclusive domain of murderers and prostitutes. I think all of us need to examine our lives from time to time and ask the question,

"Where am I headed in life? And if I continue
in the direction I'm now headed, where will it
take me and where will I end up? And is it
where God wants me to be?"

Daniel Defoe, author of Robinson Crusoe, ran away from home and went to sea as a young man. His father protested young Defoe's plans and his mother wept. But Defoe, strong-willed, was determined to have his own way. On his very first voyage out, his ship was wrecked and young Defoe barely escaped with his life. He saw his foolishness and the bad choice he had made, but he was afraid to go back home because he knew his friends would make fun of him and remembering how he felt, Defoe came to the conclusion that people are not ashamed of sin, but they are ashamed to repent which is an interesting thought to play around with,

In other words, could it be that we are more ashamed of changing directions than we are continuing our sins...whatever they may be. Studies in psychology reinforce that idea. These studies show that once we have decided on a course of action - particularly a dubious course of action - a course of action totally out of character with our better selves....that we will build up all kinds of rationalizations to justify that course of action.

And the more others point out our faults, the more we feel the need to justify our aberrant behavior...our straying from the right way. It could be that our pride becomes involved and in a most demonic twist of thinking, we harden in our justifications until we get to the point that we will "fight rather than switch"....even when we know what we are doing is just stupid beyond belief.

And the message comes from Christ and from those who love us,

"Turn around. Please...for your own sake and for the
sake of those who love you most....turn around...turn!"

Have you ever heard those words before? Has anyone ever spoken them to you. I'm not asking you to lift a hand, but let me ask you this: have you ever been tempted to speak those words to someone else and have you spoken them? We all need to hear them from time to time....that's the first message Christ has for us. Turn around.

HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT YOUR LIFE...THUS FAR?

And here's the second. How do you feel about your life thus far? Any regrets? Do you ever look back over your life and wish you had done some things differently? From years and hours of counselling and listening to people I have discovered that most people's lives have a secret here or there. Most of us have some part of our lives we wouldn't particularly want to share with our children, or a spouse, or our parents, or friends. Most of us can look at our lives and say,

"Gee.....I didn't handle that relationship quite like I should have....or....I wish now I hadn't said that...or done that.....or I wish I had spent more time here and less time over there....or...if only I could go back and live that part again...."

You know I thought about all of this when I heard recently about a thriving new business that some one has started. Most of you are familiar with a new method of selling items. Through this new method you can buy almost anything from credit cards to some celebrity secrets, from love and romance to sex scandals. This new sales phenomenon is the 900 PHONE LINE.

For instance, after the Jim Baker scandal a few years back, if you had a yen to hear Jessica Hahn tell all about her most intimate secrets, or to hear "what really happened" to her, you could call 1-900-230-5050. Let me give you that number again...ready? Or, if you had an interest in meeting the man or the woman of your dreams, Jessica would help you do that also with her 900-LOVE PHONE. Of course, the way these telephone services work is that the call costs you anywhere from \$ 2.00 to \$ 50.00 for the first minute and \$ 1.50 to \$ 25.00 for each additional minute, as some of you may have discovered.

There's a minister, a colleague by the name of Gregory Schmidt, up on Shelton, Connecticut who tells of watching a TV News Show, like A Current Affair. On that show he saw a report that he says has led him to consider changing the focus of his ministry. The show was about a woman who ran a 900 Phone Service called, THE CONFESSION LINE. The "confessions" which people made included anything and everything....from admissions of petty theft to adultery and even to murder. This woman explained that she had been operating this service for just under a year and the 25 lines she had were busy 24 hours of the day and night. The woman went on to say that The Confession Line was such a success she was expanding to 100 lines in order to keep up with the demand.

Finally, and this was the part that really got Pastor Schmidt's mind turned on...racing....she admitted that in the first year of operation, The Confession Line made close to 17 million dollars. An idea for retirement...more fun than writing a book, I'm sure. Which reminds me of something Ernie "Let's Play Two" Banks said to me as we stood in the buffet line up in Cooperstown...."Oh, to be a minister in NYC. Think of it! Why, there's so much sin there!" Better yet, what about a 900 number for our Church.

But here is what this phenomenon is really all about. We all have things in our lives we need to confess. Unresolved guilt is one of the great problems in lives of people. It manifests itself in physical disorders, sleeplessness, depression and numerous problems in building lasting relationships with others. And most of us are not even aware that it is a problem. Because we are confused about the nature of sin, we aren't aware of our need for forgiveness.

Sin is any "brokenness" in our lives. It is any transgression against the love of someone else or the love of God. Sin manifests itself any time we have used another person or when we have not lived up to our full potential as children of a loving God. All of us have regrets about the way we have lived our lives and I am able to say to you, on behalf of our Lord, Jesus Christ,

"Friend....you are forgiven. The past is past. It is gone forever. Today is a new day and you can be a new person. You don't have to continue to live out that old, self-defeating script any longer, anymore. You are forgiven."

CLOSING These, then, are the TWO MESSAGES Jesus means for His Church to proclaim to the world. "Turn around" and "You are forgiven". This is serious business....repentance and forgiveness....two great words that need a bit of polishing up. From time to time all of us need to hear those words and to let them have a "go" in our lives. And the healthiest person alive is that person who knows his or her sins are forgiven. Remember these "last words" reported to have been spoken by a Risen Lord....

"Repentance and forgiveness should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem....."

PRAYER Make us sensitive to Your presence....to Your spirit at work in our lives. Wrestle with us in these moments...below the surface of our lives where some things are buried that need to be taken out, looked at and discarded in the light of Your love and Your forgiveness. Turn us around and prepare us for a new day. And remind us as we prepare to depart of that Biblical word of Jesus, who said....

"I tell you that there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who do not need to repent".

In His name and spirit, we now pray. Amen.