

1 John 4:7-21

John 15:9-17

May 6, 2018

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

FAMOUS LAST WORDS

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

“Famous last words!”

In the comics, you’ll see famous last words such as these etched on tombstones:

“Watch this!”

“Of course I know what I’m doing!”

“How hard could it be?”

“I told you I was sick.”

We’re not surprised that some comedians’ famous last words are funny. When Bob Hope was dying, his beloved wife, Dolores, asked him where he wanted to be buried. His response? “Surprise me!” Groucho Marx’s famous last words were, “Die, my dear? Why, that’s the last thing I’ll do!” Of course, earlier in his life, Groucho also said, “I’m going to live forever, or die trying.”

George Washington is reported to have said, “Tis well.” Blues singer Bessie Smith died after saying, “I’m going, but I’m going in the name of the Lord.” Confederate General Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson was mistakenly shot by his own troops near Chancellorsville, VA on May 2, 1863. His left arm had to be amputated. After suffering for eight days, Stonewall died on May 10. Just before he died, he is said to have become very agitated and started shouting out battle orders. Then he stopped, calmed down, and a smile came to his face. His famous last words were, “Let us cross over the river and rest under the shade of the trees.”

In 1867, U.S. Secretary of State William H. Seward signed a treaty with Russia to buy what we know as Alaska for \$7 million (about 2 cents per acre). The deal was ridiculed as Seward’s folly, Seward’s icebox, and President Andrew Johnson’s “polar bear garden.” As Secretary Seward lay dying on October 10, 1872, he was asked if he had any final words. He replied, “Nothing, only love one another.” The last words of former Beatle George Harrison, who died of cancer in 2001, were, “Love one another.”

Then there is the story from St. Jerome’s biblical commentary on Paul’s letter to the Galatians. Jerome was a 4th century theologian and historian. He is perhaps best remembered for his translation of most of the Bible into Latin, which came to be known as the Vulgate. Galatians 6:10 says, “So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.” In his commentary on that verse, Jerome cites a story about John the Evangelist, beloved disciple of Jesus thought to be the author of the gospel bearing his name, as well as the three letters in his name. Here is the story in Jerome’s words:

“The blessed John the Evangelist lived in Ephesus until extreme old age. His disciples could barely carry him to church and he could not muster the voice to speak

many words. During individual gatherings he usually said nothing but, ‘Little children, love one another.’ The disciples and brothers in attendance, annoyed because they always heard the same words, finally said, ‘Teacher, why do you always say this?’ He replied with a line worthy of John: ‘Because it is the Lord’s commandment and if it alone is kept, it is sufficient.’”¹

Of course, the most famous famous last words are what Jesus said when he hung on the cross. Taken from the four gospels, there are seven statements:

“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

To Mary, “Woman, this is your son.” To John, “This is your mother.”

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

“I am thirsty.”

“It is finished.”

“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”

But there is another collection of famous last words of Jesus, although technically they are not his last last words. Tradition says that the author of the gospel also wrote the Revelation, in which you read this doxology in chapter 5: “Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” My friend, college and seminary classmate, Dr. Francis Taylor Gench, a professor of New Testament at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, has written extensively on Jesus’ words in the Gospel of John. Here’s how Frances introduced an article about today’s Gospel lesson: “Recently I heard someone describe Jesus in John this way: ‘Wordy is the Lamb’! It is not a bad description, for the Johannine Jesus is given to extended discourse, nowhere more so than in his farewell conversations with his disciples on the night before his death (John 13-17). Excerpts from these extraordinary conversations are appointed for the church’s reflection throughout the season of Easter, for they prepare disciples of every age for life after Easter and for a ministry in the world that is the continuation of Jesus’ own.”²

Since the gospels tell us that all of Jesus’ disciples deserted him and ran away when he was arrested and crucified, we can rightly call what Jesus tells them the night before he died his “famous last words.” On that fateful night, Jesus began by washing his disciples’ feet and telling them, “So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.” (John 13:14) You can easily substitute the word “love” and get at the heart of Jesus’ words later on in chapter 15: “So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have loved you, you also ought to love one another.”

After he washed their feet, Jesus gave his disciples a new commandment: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. by this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34-35)

Jesus then promised the disciples the gift of the Holy Spirit. He talked about being the true vine and the disciples being the branches that need to bear much fruit. He warned them about the world’s hatred of them because of him (which stands in stark contrast to Jesus’ command to love one another). He instructed them about the work

of the Holy Spirit that would help them continue to do his work after he was gone. Jesus promised them peace. Jesus prayed for his disciples, for the world, and for you and me (that's right, he prayed for you and me on the night before he died, when he said, "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one." (John 17:20)

In the midst of all of his wordiness, Jesus says, "This is my commandment, that you love one another." (John 15:12) Here's how Jesus' last words are rendered in *The Message*:

"I've loved you the way my Father has loved me. Make yourselves at home in my love. If you keep my commands, you'll remain intimately at home in my love. That's what I've done — kept my Father's commands and made myself at home in his love. I've told you these things for a purpose: that my joy might be your joy, and your joy wholly mature. This is my command: Love one another the way I loved you. This is the very best way to love. Put your life on the line for your friends. You are my friends when you do the things I command you. I'm no longer calling you servants because servants don't understand what their master is thinking and planning. No, I've named you friends because I've let you in on everything I've heard from the Father. . . . But remember the root command: Love one another."

"If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love." What are Jesus' commandments? He tells us very plainly a couple of verses later: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." (John 15:12)

So, how are we supposed to do that? Aside from talking about laying down your life for your friends, Jesus doesn't give many specifics, at least not in his last words to his disciples. Maybe Jesus was counting on the disciples to act on what they had seen Jesus himself doing throughout his ministry, to love people the way they had seen Jesus love people — not in word only, but in action and in deed.

One good way to understand scripture is to look at other scripture lessons. Do you remember what Jesus said when he was asked, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Mark 12:28-30) I paired John 15 with 1 John 4 today, because 1 John 4 reflects John 15 so well. The apostle John wrote, "We love because he first loved us. Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers and sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also." (1 John 4:19-21)

You might be wondering, "Can you be more specific?" Well, how about this from the apostle Paul, when he writes about being free in Christ: "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is

summed up in a single commandment. “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Galatians 5:13-14)

Or how about these words from Romans 12? “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.” (Romans 12:9-13)

Then there are these famous words about love: “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things . . . And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” (1 Corinthians 13:4-7, 13)

Maybe Jesus doesn’t give us any particular guidelines about how to love another, because he knows we will have to figure that out in our own situations. And, yes, it is hard! Don’t think I’m naive in preaching this sermon this morning — I know the struggle of loving my neighbor as I love myself. But I also know that Jesus didn’t just speak famous last words, he lived them out and showed us what it means to love God and to love neighbor.

I don’t know how famous these next last words are in general, but they became pretty famous at the Montreat Youth Conference last August. The preacher for the week, Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow, ended each night’s sermon with the same benediction. It didn’t take long before all of us were joining him in something like a call and response. If you’re struggling with what it means to “love one another,” think on Jesus’ famous last words as you hear these last words:

*Go forth into the world
With compassion and justice in your heart
Give strength to the weak
Give voice to the silent
See one another. Hear one another
Care for one another
And love one another
It’s all that easy And it’s all that hard
Now may the grace of God
The love of Christ
And the power of the Holy Spirit
Be with us all, now and forever more
Amen.*

Let us pray: Great and loving God, you have prepared for those who love you joys beyond understanding. Pour into our hearts such love for you, that, loving you above all else, we might be able to love one another.

Keep us steadfast in love and faithful to your Word; through Jesus Christ, who loved us to the end and loves us still. Amen.

NOTES

¹www.christianityexchange.com.

²Frances Taylor Gench, "John 15:12-17," *Interpretation* (April 2004, Volume 58, No. 2), p. 181.