

**MESSAGE: “Last Words”**

**Text: Acts 1:1-11**

**Purpose: the purpose of this message is to reflect on the power of last words, the promise of Jesus’ last words and a possible pattern for our last words.**

**Last words have power. They are often remembered, revisited, reflected on and preserved. The last words of Nostradamus were, appropriately, a prediction, “Tomorrow at sunrise, I shall no longer be here.” He was right. When Harriet Tubman was dying in 1913, her family gathered around singing. Her last words were, “Swing low, sweet chariot.” Some last words are humorous. Drummer Buddy Rich died following surgery in 1987. As he was prepped for the operation, a nurse asked, is there anything you can’t take?” Rich replied, “Yeah, country music.” When Bob Hope died at age 100, his wife Dolores asked him which of two places he would prefer to be buried. His last words were, “Surprise me.”**

**Some last words take on added significance in hindsight. The last song that Ariana Grande performed at her concert in Manchester was called “One Last Time.” The lyric included the words, “So one last time I need to be the one who takes you home. One more time I promise after that, I’ll let you go. Baby I don’t care if you got her in your heart. All I really care is you wake up in my arms one last time. I need to be the one who takes you home.” It was the last lyric some of her fans would ever hear due to the terrorist act that claimed their lives. Last words do have power.**

**Some last words cast a light for a lifetime. When I was a high school sophomore, I heard Rev. Harold J. Ockenga preach at the Fuller Family Chapel in Hampton, NH. He was a defining pastor of Boston’s historic Park Street Church, a founding president of the seminary I would be attending and a Christian leader I held in high esteem. He died before my arrival on the seminary campus, but I have often recalled his words to me when he learned of my vocational intent, “Always keep that vision!” His words inspire me still.**

**When we think of the last words of Jesus, we often think of his final words on the cross, translated, “It is finished. Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” These are not his last words, however, for the Easter miracle put a comma where the executioners put a period. For forty days following his resurrection, Jesus appeared before his disciples to speak, teach and encourage.**

**When the time came for his ascension to heaven, he spoke words of instruction and promise recorded in different form (though similar tenor) by Matthew and Luke. Matthew’s account translates, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given me. Therefore 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. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

By comparison, Luke’s account, recorded in Acts 1, translates, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Put together, the message is: “The Holy Spirit is coming to empower you to make disciples throughout the world, and my spirit will be with you.”

Notice there is no question of “if.” Jesus’ last words are not a request or plea to carry on his work. His words are pregnant with confidence: “You WILL receive power...you WILL be my witnesses. The story of Jesus, ignited by the Holy Spirit, was a volcano ready to erupt. It could not be contained, and it would mark everyone it came in contact with from that time forward. It continues to leave its mark. It marked a Pharisee named Saul who became Paul and established the ancient Church. It marked a man named John Wesley by warming his heart with an irresistible call to scriptural holiness, planting the Methodist movement. It marked a woman named Mother Theresa who cared for the poorest of the poor in Calcutta, reminding a planet to be compassionate. It has left its mark on you and me, and we, too, are commissioned for God’s service.

None of us knows what our last words will be as we draw our final breath. Personally, I hope mine will be similar to the words Michel Landon last spoke to his family gathered about, “You’re right. It’s time. I love you all.” But as I have walked with parishioners and family members through their last days, I have learned that there are five things which may be shared that make the leave-taking a healthy one. They are evident in the life of Jesus, and they may be evident in our lives, too.

The first is, “Please forgive me.” Jesus did not speak the words in this form, but he did all he could to prepare his disciples for the day he would be taken from them. Much of the emotional tangle of grief comes from the abandonment we feel from one we have depended upon. “I need you here, but you are not!” When we accept the fact that every real and meaningful relationship we have is scarred by misunderstanding and miscommunication at times, we can honestly confess our part in it. By taking responsibility for pain we have intentionally or inadvertently inflicted and requesting forgiveness, we heal any brokenness that remain. The pain is acknowledged, and put in context, so that it cannot petrify into regret for the future.

The second is, “I forgive you.” Jesus spoke this word from the cross itself, “Father, forgive them. They do not know what they are doing.” If we say this to a person who is dying, or moving away, or leaving for another reason, we are releasing them emotionally from any offense they may have committed, knowingly or unknowingly. We are letting the

debt, real or perceived, go. It is a moment of Jubilee for us and for them, and new beginnings are possible. When John Wesley was robbed by a highwayman one day, he gave words of counsel as he surrendered his money. "One day, young man, you may regret this course of action. When you do, remember the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses you from all sin." Years later, Wesley encountered that same man who confessed, "The words you said to me that night burned in my soul. It led to my conversion and I became a minister."

The third hearkens back to Michael Landon's farewell, "I love you all." Of course, you do not say it, unless you mean it, but it can be tremendously healing to the one who gives and the one who receives such an acknowledgment of the treasure you have become to one another. How sad it is when we are left guessing about our relationship with those closest to us! Much too often, I have heard parishioners confess, "I never really knew if Dad, Mom, he, she or even God for that matter loved me." Incidentally, if you are uncertain about how God feels about you, read Psalm 139 or I John, chapter 4, and you will be assured that God loves you deeply. Tell the important ones in your life how you feel about them. Tell them now, while you can.

The fourth word is, "Thank you." Before departing from a school, residence, career, friendship, church or life, take the time to say 'Thank you.' Gratitude honors the investment of time, talent and spirit that you and the other have made in an institution or life. I remember the day I worked for my father in the family business for the very last time. At that point in his life, he found it difficult to express emotion (except anger) or gratitude in demonstrative form. I felt 'hurt' that he seemingly ignored this ending and change in our relationship until I picked up my final check in my family mailbox. In the memo, he wrote two words, "Thank you." I don't spontaneously cry very often, but I did in that moment, and it was the beginning of a genuine friendship with my father.

Finally, the last word to share for a healthy leave-taking is, "Good-bye." Many often want to avoid this, preferring an illusion of meeting again in the future. I do believe, of course, that we will one day be reunited with those who have gone to glory before us, but we do ourselves and those we love no help when we pretend a 'good-bye isn't happening.' The word helps us to let go, and subsequently, to move on. That is why funeral services are important. I have seen spouses frozen in grief, days, months, sometimes years, simply because they never had an opportunity to really say, "Good-bye." A funeral or memorial service helps us do this.

In our culture, last words are sometimes chiseled into the stone that marks our final resting place. We see them when we decorate graves with flags, wreaths, plants and shrubs. I saw one not long ago that counseled, "Dear friend, as you pass by, as you are now so once was I. As I am now, so you will be. Prepare yourself to follow me." Underneath someone

**added a last word to the last word. It read, "To follow you is not my intent, until I find out which way you went." May God's grace be with you as you remember those who released their lives so that we might continue to live free.**