***LAST WORDS***

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Texts: Matthew 28:16-20 and 2 Corinthians 13:11-14

If you had the opportunity to offer last words of advice to family or friends, what would they be? By this I do not mean words to put on your tombstone, like the man who had “I told you I was sick” inscribed in stone. What would you want to tell your friends or family as your last words? William Seward, rival to Abraham Lincoln and then his Secretary of State and trusted friend, took great pride in what was described as “Seward’s Folly” – that much-criticized purchase of a little piece of land now known as Alaska. He died peacefully in 1872 at the age of 71, surrounded by his family. When his daughter-in-law Jenny asked if he had any deathbed advice to impart, he said simply: “Love one another.”[[1]](#endnote-1) Is that what you would say as your parting advice? Or would there be something else that would be important to you to pass along to your friends or family with your last words?

At the end of Matthew’s gospel, we hear the risen Jesus speaking to his disciples in Galilee, and while some of the disciples were filled with awe and wonder at what they were seeing and hearing, some were still hesitant to believe their ears and eyes. “*Some doubted*,” writes Matthew. Jesus does not distinguish between the true believers and the doubters. He speaks to all of them, words that are his last according to Matthew, familiar words that comprise what is known as the Great Commission:

*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore 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 all that I have commanded you. And lo, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*

It is the exclamation point to his ministry and the segue from the ministry of Jesus to the ministry of the church. Jesus sends his disciples out into the world with a sense of urgency:

GO from where you are most comfortable, most secure, most at home; GO with a purpose: to make disciples of all nations. GO and bring into relationship with me and with you the peoples of other places, people who may seem to be very different from you but are fundamentally like you in this respect: they too are children of God created in the image of God! GO to them! WELCOME them! TEACH them. BAPTIZE them. And KNOW that I am with you always to the end of the age.

The Great Commission, which contains that Trinitarian formula by which we baptized little Julianne this morning, that same Trinitarian formula by which you all were baptized who are baptized – in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – calls us to be in relationships of mutuality and love with one another and with God. Our mission is not an intellectual exercise to figure out God or to know and articulate just the right things about our faith. It is not a matter of the head; it is a matter of the heart. It is shared experiences and shared lives that mark us as disciples of the risen Christ. It is spoken with the authority of heaven and earth and its first word is GO! The same Christ who invites us to COME to this table, commissions us to GO into the world with the good news of the Gospel on our lips and in our hands.

What does that mission look like in practice? According to the Gospel writers:

* It looks like a good Samaritan who finds a stranger beaten and bloodied on the side of the road, stops to minister to his wounds, carries him to an inn, and provides for his care there.
* It looks like a Father who welcomes home with open arms the rebellious son who has wasted his inheritance and wished the father dead.
* It looks like Andrew finding his brother Simon and urging him to come and follow this stranger Jesus, saying: “We have found the Messiah!”
* It looks like a young woman anointing Jesus’ feet with precious ointment, washing them with her tears, and drying them with her hair.
* It looks like Jesus telling the rowdy, self-righteous crowd about to stone the woman caught in adultery: “Let you who is without sin cast the first stone.”
* It looks like the crucified Jesus whispering with his last breaths from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”
* And it looks like the risen Jesus commissioning his disciples to go and make more disciples, including those disciples who still harbored doubts that he could be risen from the dead.

To people around the world across the last two thousand years

* It looks like Paul preaching on street corners in Athens and Philip stopping to converse with an Ethiopian eunuch.
* It looks like St. Patrick bringing the Gospel to Celtic people on a windswept island.
* It looks like St. Francis of Assisi giving up his creature comforts to serve others with a humble, generous spirit.
* It looks like Martin Luther nailing his 95 theses to the door at Wittenberg Cathedral 500 years ago.
* It looks like Mother Teresa comforting poor infants in the slums of Calcutta.

And these days

* It looks like a gaggle of children in our preschool gathered around me and occasionally on me on these steps to hear a word about God and sing a song with loving teachers by their sides.
* It looks like folks teaching English or providing transportation for members of the refugee family we are helping.
* It looks like food boxes being delivered by Covenant folks to our neighbors in the Hispanic community.
* It looks like the Helping Hands program inviting children here the week before school starts to share in fun and fellowship while being showered with the love of Christ.
* It looks like folks serving meals at Trinity Soup Kitchen.
* It looks like youth heading to Montreat for the Youth Conference in a few weeks.
* It looks like our baptism of little Julianne today.

It looks like a lot of things, this mission to which we are called in the Great Commission. But does it look in any way, shape or form like you? Is the Great Commission being fulfilled in and through your life? Are you taking to heart these last words of Jesus and going and making disciples of all nations and teaching them to obey all that Jesus commanded, which is first and foremost to love God and love one another?

You don’t have to go to a foreign country or rant on a street corner from a soapbox or take a vow of poverty to fulfill that Great Commission, but you might do any of those things if that is what God calls you to do. For most of us, we just have to be faithful in what we say and what we do wherever it is God sends us, even if that is just next door. We are called to be in relationship with God and with the world, joyfully sharing the Good News of Jesus with a world aching for some news that is good.

That is what Paul did in planting those churches across the eastern end of the Mediterranean. He proclaimed the Gospel and nurtured faith and offered advice to guide them in their journeys of faith. And in the last words of his second letter to the Corinthians he offered to them this blessing which may sound somewhat familiar to you:

*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the koinonia of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*

It is a Trinitarian blessing that I have been offering as my last words to you each week at the end of our worship these last 25 years or so, a blessing that embraces grace, love, and *koinonia*. There is no good translation of that Greek word – *koinonia* – for it embraces shared fellowship and communion and participation in ministry inspired by the Spirit, kind of like the Force in *Star Wars* that unites and empowers all things and all people for good. It is that *koinonia* and that grace and that love that we are called to share in ministry together – not just within these walls but also and especially outside these walls as we go and make disciples of all nations as Jesus commanded us to do.

Are you doing that, my brothers and sisters? Can you do that – go and do as Jesus asked us to do, go with that blessing of grace and love and *koinonia* showered upon you, go and be faithful in being a disciple and in making disciples and in loving your neighbors all in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit? For that is Jesus’ Great Commission – for his disciples, for you, and for me. Amen

1. Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals*, Simon & Schuster: New York, 2005, p.751 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)