

Famous Last Words
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
November 25, 2018

Jeremiah 1:4-10, Matthew 28:18-20

Studies show the easiest things to remember are those that come either first or last in a speech. You can pretty much forget about the middle. If that's really the case, I could wrap up this sermon up now and we could all go get some pancakes in Wilton Hall, what do you think?

If you're like the average church attender in this country (which of course you're not, because you're the wonderful people of Monroe Congregational) the main point of my sermon won't matter beyond that platter of fluffy, starchy, maple syrup-soaked goodness you're all looking forward to for turning in your completed pledge card.

Last words are memorable. Parents know this. Your kid stomps off to his bedroom refusing to apologize for disrespecting you, and you issue that FINAL warning: *"Come out and say sorry now or you lose your T.V. and computer privileges for the rest of the week."* Sure enough, in a few short moments that door is opening again...

There are other, more famous last words:

Some of you may remember Steve Irwin, who starred in that documentary series "The Crocodile Hunter." His last words, before dying from a stingray's puncture wound to the chest, were *"Don't worry. They usually don't swim backwards."*

Beatles singer and songwriter George Harrison was recorded saying before he died, simply, *"Love one another."*

And can you guess the American distiller Jack Daniel's last request? That's right: *"One last drink, please."*

But seriously, when we're aware that something we're about to say or do will be the very last thing we say or do, we tend to value our message more, don't we?

In his last appearance to the disciples, Jesus sends message, and it's really a two-part message: part command, part promise and assurance.

First, the command ... *“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.”*

Maybe it’s easy to overlook how terrifying his words would have been in their original context. Think about it. A strange teacher, with an other-worldly authority to do all sorts of miracles and a knack for ticking off the religious types of his day, shows up, calling them to leave everything behind and follow him.

The disciples did just that, and in the process are transformed. But just when they’ve come around to believing that Jesus is in fact the Savior their people have been waiting for, he ends up dead on a cross. Naturally, they scatter and flee only to discover three days later that what the women said was true... their Messiah was alive.

Understandably, such events would be traumatic for the average person. (The story suggests that Jesus chose very average—maybe even below-average—people to follow Him.) Imagine, then, that after undergoing these things and beginning to see very in-breaking of God in the flesh, you were told, shortly thereafter, that this God in the flesh would be off now, leaving you to take up His business.

I’m guessing shivers might run down your spine. You might think twice. You at least might have a few questions, don’t you think?

Which is why I am grateful for that little clause that precedes Jesus’ command: *“but some doubted.”*

Because I’ll say it right now: if I were in this story, I might be among them—the doubting disciples, I mean. With a big, open-mouthed look of wonder that a guy who had been my saving hope was now taking off into the great, blue sky. Because the messianic party had only just begun, and now the host was taking off. The Savior’s new triumphant order of things, of a world made right, of a people restored, was just starting to settle in when DING, there he was pressing the eternal elevator button and leaving me behind.

Leaving me behind to do the talking before chief priests and angry mobs and Roman tribunals, all of whom would prefer my head on a platter to hearing about a Messiah named Jesus.

So I can imagine that for some of them, Jesus' Great Commission could have sounded a whole lot more like this: *"Gotta run, but keep the party going for me!"* Or worse, *"It's been fun. Don't forget about those dirty dishes!"*

Baptizing the whole world in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit? Teaching them to obey all God's commands? These are not small requests. Jesus is entrusting us with a great responsibility, one of witnessing to the whole world about the whole story of God's love for us. That love does not come easily. It's a sacrificial love, a love that puts others first.

Following Jesus means you're choosing to exist for more than just yourself. You're choosing to exist for the life of the world, or as the Prophet Jeremiah would put it: the life of the foreigner, the life of the widow, the life of the orphan.

We can't fulfill Jesus' command on our own. When left to our own devices, we, like the first disciples, can get distracted. Which is why we so desperately need the second part of his last message to us: *"And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

This is what we need to remember, right before we enter Advent, a time of waiting for the incarnation to come again.

This is what needs to be in the front of our minds, as we welcome our newest members into our church community, including them as an equal part of what we are doing in the name of love.

And this needs to be our motivation, as we pull together our financial stewardship of this congregation and consider what that support means for our future, and our children's future.

We will doubt. We will stumble. We will fail – that's all part of the journey. So it gives me comfort to Jesus will be with us always. And because of that, we will have all the grace we need to share God's love in word and deed.

Let me say that again, because they're the last words of this sermon: because Jesus will be with us always, we will have all the grace we need to share God's love in word and deed. Amen.