

Final words

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F.M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,
at the eleven o'clock service, May 9, 2010: The Sixth Sunday of Easter.
Based on John 14:23-29*

Final words are often really important. I am a little obsessed with them actually. I don't like to get on an airplane without a last conversation with those I love most. It is a touch morose, not to mention a little silly. A short ride in a cab or crossing the street while talking on my cell phone is infinitely more likely to result in my demise than air travel, but my desire for taking special care with final words doesn't have a lot to do with reason. It has to do with love—and perhaps just a bit with the need to control. When I explain to my son again where the important papers are and give a final word of advice on how he should spend the rest of his life, as though I have not perhaps mentioned that already, I can practically feel his eyes rolling to the back of his head. But we all do that in one way or another. Several years ago when the mother of a dear friend of mine was dying, we gathered at her bedside to pray, to be with her in what we knew were her final moments. She was a rare beauty, a former Miss Ole Miss, no small accomplishment, and had spent a good bit of her life attending to her looks. When we thought she was just about gone, she roused long enough to look at her daughter, my friend, and say: "Darling, don't forget to moisturize your face every night." And then she was gone.

Today's lesson from the gospel of John contains a part of what is called his final discourse. Though I could justify it, I am not going to spend much time this morning discussing the context for John's gospel. His polemic is well defined and sharp-edged: his understanding is the right one, the ultimate one; and those who do not agree are wrong. His Jesus says, "I am the truth, the way, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me." End of story—as far as John is concerned. The truth, it seems to me, is a lot more complicated

and considerably more generous than that. And, though this can be said of all scripture, it is particularly important in reading John's words to remember that the truth often lies beyond, around, under the specific words themselves. Be that as it may, though, John has some beautiful images that warm our hearts and tell us something true and dear about God, certainly about the hope of God's people. I don't want to miss those images by doing what I often accuse others of doing, which is to rely on literalistic reading of scripture. His exclusive message, his drawing a line in the sand, is about his hurt and anger, as the church became more differentiated, not about the truth of God.

Hearing through and around those words what the community of John remembered or imagined to be the last words of Jesus speaks deeply to me. In their memory, Jesus is taking care of important business in this long final discourse with the disciples, covering much more important information than life insurance and moisturizing policies. In these few verses we have heard, Jesus covers at least three important points that are critical to us as people who desire to know God.

"If you love me, do as I have said. Love others as I have loved you. Turn the other cheek, love your enemy, seek God and others before self." In the chapter just before this one, we read the story of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. "Love like this," Jesus said, "and you will be known as my disciple." It is worth noting that a gospel, which has been often used to support the most exalted, even triumphal understanding of Christianity contains this most poignant example of selfless love. Messages, even in the telling of the gospels, come more forcefully from actions rather than just words.

Jesus in this passage introduces clearly the notion of the Advocate, which is to come as he departs. “To help you when I am gone, I am sending an Advocate, the Holy Spirit, who will teach you everything. Yes, everything you need to know, the Spirit will teach you. You just have to pay attention.” We don’t need to get bogged down in attempting to understand the chronology of the coming of the Spirit. Was the Spirit not here all along; did the coming of the Spirit occur only on Pentecost, which we shall observe a couple of weeks from today? Of course, the Spirit was already present, but the importance of the passage is less about quoting something that Jesus said about the Spirit and more about the witness of this community to the moving of the Spirit, a presence they clearly felt among them. Their lives were shaped by something that was beyond the life of this man, this historical man Jesus. No one living at the time of the gospel’s writing had been alive during Jesus’ life; but still they felt a presence, a stirring in their souls that led them to do extraordinary things, sometimes spot-on and sometimes missing the point.

They experienced this Spirit as an advocate, a notion, which for me is among the loveliest and most hopeful images in all scripture. It is one that lingers for us. When life crumbles around us, and on occasion it does without exception crumble (if it hasn’t for you, just stand by; it will), this Spirit, invisible, improvable, sustains us, moves us when we cannot move ourselves, holds us when otherwise we could not stand, and sees us through events that except for it would utterly overwhelm us. When I speak of God, when I think of God, it is the Spirit truly that I mean. Yesterday I spent a day of retreat with a group of young adults, people in their 20’s and 30’s, talking about prayer. Can you imagine? It was wonderful and encouraging to hear them talk about paying attention to the moving of the Spirit in their lives. These are not religious fanatics; they are real people bearing witness to something beyond themselves. It occurred to me, as it often does, that the secularism we see

all around us may not be as impenetrable as we think it is. Just because people don’t practice religion as they once did (or we have been told that they once did) does not mean that the Spirit of God is not with us, changing and molding our lives.

Jesus is remembered also as saying in these last words, “I am leaving my peace with you. It is different from what the world gives you and I am leaving it just for you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.” I have to wonder if as the disciples’ lives unfolded, they might have thought, “Jesus, if I had known what your peace would bring, I would have passed on receiving it.” Tradition claims, after all, that each of the disciples was martyred, every last one of them. So it was no ordinary peace of which Jesus spoke, not the sentimental absence of conflict, no warm and fuzzy satisfaction bought at the expense of integrity. It was not a peace that the world can either give us or take from us. It is the peace that passes understanding.

Jesus did not talk a great deal about peace—at least not in words that are remembered. In Hebrew, the word for peace is Shalom, which in part means fullness, completeness. The word suggests having all we need to be wholly and joyfully who we are created to be. That helps a bit, but regardless of its literal interpretation what Jesus said about peace is on the surface more than a little contradictory. On one hand, we are presented a picture of him as he lovingly endows his followers with his peace, an inheritance of kindness and generosity, a gentle man holding children and turning the other cheek, a loving advocate seeking wholeness for his beloved disciples. In another place he is recorded to have said something like, “Don’t think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” And then, of course, there is the story of his flipping a few tables over in the courtyard of the temple.

So which is it? Can Jesus have it both ways? Yes, I think he can—for the peace which passes all understanding lives in that paradox. For Jesus, peace did not mean the absence of struggle but

the presence of love. Love stirs things up in a hurry; it rarely opts to simply observe or to abide in a vessel of sterile objectivity. In fact, objectivity is greatly overrated. If Jesus’ life is to be our example, we are not called to be objective. Jesus took sides; I don’t think he took names, but he surely took sides. He took the side of peace even when it created all sorts of opposition from every direction. His own family often thought that he was nuts; his village folks tried to throw him over the cliff; and finally, the really powerful movers and shakers had him killed.

Important last words—all of these are. Love as Jesus did; rely upon an Advocate, the Holy Spirit, to help us; and experience a complicated peace that passes our understanding. If we hear them, if we really hear these words and take them into our hearts, the world can still be a different place

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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