

Famous Last Words
Matthew 28:16-20
Trinity Sunday
June 11, 2017
First Presbyterian Church

Introduction to the Reading

Our reading this morning
contains what I am calling Jesus' "famous last words."
According to Matthew's gospel
he spoke them just after the resurrection.
The disciples have gone to Galilee as they were told...
there they experience the presence of their Risen Lord...
and they respond precisely as you might expect.
Matthew records that:
"When they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted." Actually, the Greek
word translated "doubted"
really means "wavered,"
and for some reason the English
inserts the word "some" that's not in the Greek.
So the verse really reads, "And when they saw him,
they worshipped and wavered."
It is a perfectly understandable response
to what they had experienced –
"worshipping and wavering."
It is also a perfectly accurate description
of how the church has been responding to Christ
for the last 2,000 years.
So, as they "worship and waver,"
Jesus speaks these famous last words...
including the instruction to baptize
in the name of the Father, Son, Holy Spirit.
That is perhaps the clearest enunciation of the Trinity
as anywhere in the New Testament...
which is why we are given this passage
on Trinity Sunday.

Bible Reading

¹⁶Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them.
¹⁷When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Sermon

It is undeniable that the “last words” people speak
bear special weight.

There are whole books of famous last words...
now there are websites devoted
to the last words of people of note.

Just a few examples:



At his death, Leonardo da Vinci was incredibly modest
when he said, “I have offended God and mankind
because my work did not reach the quality it should have.”



Charles Darwin said: “I am not the least afraid to die”.



When abolitionist and humanitarian, Harriet Tubman,
was dying in 1913,
she gathered her family around and they sang together.
Her last words were, “Swing low, sweet chariot.”



Basketball great “Pistol” Pete Maravich
was one of my heroes as a kid.
He suddenly collapsed during a pickup game
and his last words were: “I feel great.”

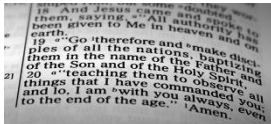


At the moment of his death, musician Bob Marley said:
“Money can’t buy life.”



And according to Steve Jobs' sister Mona,
the Apple founder's last words were,
"Oh wow. Oh wow. Oh wow."

Sometimes last words are weighty...
sometimes they are tender...
and sometimes they are funny...
sometimes they are biting...
but people attend to last words –
their finality makes them, well, “final” –
and therefore important.



The challenge of these very famous last words of Jesus
is that they are so famous and so familiar
that we could easily miss something
the church needs to hear today.
For me... today... this easy-to-miss something
comes toward the end of a series of four actions
the Lord commands his disciples to be about.¹
Jesus says: GO... MAKE... BAPTIZE... and TEACH.
And what's interesting to me is WHAT it is
the Lord wants them to teach people.
You would have thought (at least *I* would have thought)
that he would want them
to teach people what to *believe about him*.

Obey

But instead, he sends them to teach others
“to OBEY everything I have commanded you.”
And what has he commanded them
over the last few years?
Week, quite a lot actually...
according to Matthew, Jesus' commands

¹ This insight and much of what follows was inspired by Michael Lindvall's sermon “Jesus' Other Last Words” preached May 18, 2008 at Brick Presbyterian Church, New York City.

but don't believe much of what we believe about God,
much less about Jesus.
What about that?

And then there's a second, even more uncomfortable truth.
Because the opposite is also the case.
We have all known people
who *believe* all the things we believe about Jesus,
but who *do* things that are merciless, graceless, unloving,
and just plain *wrong*.
What about that?

Well, on Sundays we Presbyterians
tend to use a lot of "belief language."
This morning's baptism of little Maddox was a great example.
The words Heather and I spoke were permeated
with what we believe about God and us and salvation
and who is responsible for that.
Many weeks we will recite a creed or confession of faith...
we study Bible stories and listen to sermons and sing songs,
all which form our beliefs.
So there's no doubt in my mind
that the things we believe really do matter
when it comes to how we actually live the rest of the week.
Call it "Christian integrity"... call it "walking our talk"...
and God help us if this alignment between
what we "say" and what we "do" ever be greatly broken.



There's a little non-Biblical parable
I have shared with you before –
it's about the integrity between
what we believe as a church
and how we live as a church in the world.
It goes like this:
"Along a windswept and rocky coastline
there were a great many shipwrecks.
The survivors of these shipwrecks
were forever in need of rescue from the icy waters."



They needed food, warm shelter,
and some loving reassurance after their ordeal.
To accomplish this service,
numerous life-saving stations grew up along the coast.
Volunteers gave their time and resources,
often risking their lives for others.



They braved the surf in their lifeboats
to rescue the drowning.
They fed, housed and comforted
countless storm-tossed survivors.
And as the centuries passed,
many of these life-saving stations grew in reputation
as bright and safe havens from the storms of life.



The members of the life-saving stations
enjoyed each others' company,
enjoyed their meetings and club ceremonies.
Some members found great satisfaction
in keeping the stations neat and their lifeboats ship-shape.

Well, as the ages rolled by,
some of the life-saving station members
suggested that risking your neck in small boats
for the sake of strangers was well, foolish.

‘People who put out to sea
ought to know the risks they’re taking
and accept responsibility for themselves.
After all,’ they asked, ‘is their safety really our problem?’

Other members noted that the survivors
who washed up on the beach
made a real mess in the life-saving stations,
wet and sick as they were,
and that all the food and blankets and lifeboats
were a strain on the budget.

Some of the stations stopped sending out boats at all,
and no longer offered care for the survivors of storms.



They kept their lifeboats, however.

In fact, they painted them beautifully
and moved them inside
as objects of veneration and remembrance.

And they kept up the buildings.

They had meetings,
continued to enjoy each other's company,
and held their traditional ceremonies.

But outside their doors,
the storms still blew and ships still foundered.”



The mortal danger that every church faces

is that it become just a pleasant fellowship
of people who look and think alike –
a vaguely spiritual club
of those who are culturally comfortable with each other.

The mortal danger every church faces

is that it become a weekly liturgical cult –
enjoying fine music,
relishing in well-delivered oration,
all in good taste
and designed to please the members of the audience.

The mortal danger every church faces

is that it become no more than a successful business
that never makes a profit...
but keeps a nice building,
pays the utility bills,

employs some nice people,
and worries about little else.

The challenge to the church down through the ages...

the challenge to this church...

in fact, and the call of every one of us

who takes Jesus Christ even a bit seriously

is to guard and strengthen the connection...

the continuity... the integrity

between what we believe and what we do.

Jesus last words took two and a half verses... just 49 words...

and he used them simply to remind us to walk our talk...

to DO what we believe...

to OBEY all that he commanded us...

and to teach others to do the same.²

² Lindvall.