

Pastor's Message – 4/6/25

Luke 22:24-27

John 13:34-35

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

In my last two appointments, at Dells-Delton/Davis Corners and Shell Lake/Sarona, I officiated at a lot more funerals than I have here. I was always willing, and the funeral directors knew that, to officiate for any individual who did not have a church home and their own pastor. Since being appointed here, I've done many fewer funerals although the funeral directors know that I am still willing. After each funeral, and after the burial, I usually have time to wander among the tombstones and marvel at the dates and sometimes the decorations or words on the tombstones until my ride is ready to leave the cemetery.

Some tombstones are unadorned and just list dates. Some list relationships. Some tombstones have sayings on them: last words. There are some historically famous and profound tombstone epitaphs, e.g.

Alfred Lord Tennyson had chiseled on his tombstone, *God gives us love, something to love he lends us.*

Oscar Wilde's tombstone read, *Where there is sorrow there is holy ground.*

St. Thomas More left us these profound words, *Earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal.*

Or poet John Milton, *Death is the golden key that opens the palace of eternity.*

Even Theodor Seuss Geisel, aka Dr. Seuss, left us words of wisdom, *Don't cry because it's over, smile because it happened.*

Some people, like the above, leave us words of wisdom after they're gone; some have last words as they are leaving.

Actor Michael Landon, best known for *Little House on the Prairie* and *Highway to Heaven*, died of cancer in 1991. His family gathered around his bed, and his son said it was time to move on. Landon said, "You're right. It's time. I love you all."

As he was dying, Alfred Hitchcock said, "One never knows the ending. One has to die to know exactly what happens after death."

Emily Dickinson - The poet's last words were, "I must go in, for the fog is rising."

Nostradamus' last prediction came true, "Tomorrow, at sunrise, I shall no longer be here."

Perhaps you have already chosen your tombstone epitaph to sum up your life; perhaps you haven't thought about it. None of us know the hour or the day, so we cannot know what our final words will be as we are dying. Jesus, on the other hand, knew that his life and his mission were coming to an end. He had set his face toward Jerusalem and knew that his death awaited him there.

Since Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent, we have been focusing on The Message of Jesus; Words That Changed the World in both our Sunday worship services and our Wednesday evening Bible studies. We come today to listen to and learn from the Final Words of Jesus in the week leading up to his death.

Two Sundays from now, we will begin our observance of Holy Week, the last week before Jesus' death, with Palm/Passion Sunday. You will remember that Jesus made a triumphant entrance into Jerusalem riding on the back of a donkey. It was a day of celebration for the Jews in the city that day and they cut palm branches and laid them on the road or laid their cloaks on the road for Jesus to ride over. In the Bible readings for that day is one of my favorite passages, as recorded in Luke's Gospel,

³⁷ Now as he was approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had

seen, ³⁸ saying,

"Blessed is the king
who comes in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven,
and glory in the highest heaven!"

³⁹ Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him,
"Teacher, order your disciples to stop."

⁴⁰ He answered,

"I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

However, the people were missing the point of Jesus' mission. He did not come as a military, conquering hero to drive out Roman

occupation. Jesus “came,” rather, “to call all people to change their hearts and lives, to live according to God’s will, with God as their king,” and his call would not and will not be silenced. That call remains to this day, but some refused to hear it and some refuse even until this day.

⁴¹ As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, ⁴² saying, “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. ⁴³ Indeed, the days will come upon you when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you and hem you in on every side. ⁴⁴ They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God (Luke 19 NRSVUE).”

Jesus wept over the city because he said it recognized neither “the things that make for peace” nor “the time of [its] visitation from God” (19:42, 44 NRSVUE). His lament refers to Rome’s destruction of Jerusalem. The Romans would destroy the Temple in 70 A.D., the second time it had been destroyed. More than 600 years earlier, in 586 B.C., the Babylonians destroyed the first Temple. People still refuse to hear Jesus’ call and refuse to follow his words and our world suffers because of it. Wouldn’t today be a good day for the Messiah to come again!

In Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21, what is referred to as the “little apocalypses,” Jesus describes the events of the First Jewish-Roman War (AD 66–74) and talks about his coming for final judgment. Those events weren’t the end of the world at that time and the Bible does not give us clear prophecy of the final end of our world nor do we know when our own lives and or own individual world will end. So, we need to be ready at any moment—to have our spiritual house in order. “None of us know how long we will live, when we will die, or when Christ will return, and God will put an end to the world as we know it we need to be ready always to meet Christ at our own death.”

As the world goes on and until the final day, as the Kingdom of God draws closer, Jesus leaves us three commandments, given to his disciples at the last meal they shared before his betrayal and death, and to us today. Jesus commands us as his followers to:

“Love One Another” (John 13:34-35): Loving our neighbors, our enemies, and each another “is the defining mark of the Christian life. It is not a feeling, but a way of living and being. It is reflected in kindness, generosity, compassion, and forgiveness. It is not “warm fuzzies” but faith revealed in action.

“Serve One Another” (Luke 22:25-26): In contrast to those who seek greater status than others and coercive power over others, Jesus says the greatest in God's kingdom are those who humbly serve others. We have seen in the Beatitudes that Jesus turns the normal world and the world's way of doing things upside down into a world where the first shall be last and the last shall be first; a world wherein we make sure the hungry are fed, the thirsty receive water, the sick and those in prison are visited and the stranger is welcomed. It is a world wherein we are all called to be “Good Samaritans” and care for those who are in need, even those who are unlike us. “John makes the same point by showing Jesus taking the role of a household servant and washing his disciples' feet at the Last Supper.”

“Remember Me” (1 Corinthians 11:23-26): Paul's account of the Last Supper is the New Testament's earliest account of it (early to mid-50s). Jesus commands his disciples “not to forget him” in the meal that became Holy Communion. Because “bread and wine were a staple at most meals . . . Jesus may have intended that at every *meal* we might pause and remember him.” And today, on this 1st Sunday of the month and other days as well when we break bread and drink from the cup, we will do just that—remember Jesus and the sacrifice he made for us, the grace he offers that we might have the hope, the promise, and the guarantee of salvation for all who believe in him.

The Kingdom of God is among us and we have the power and the responsibility, even the joy, in helping to bring that Kingdom into our lives and into the world around us. None of us know when our lives will end, or what our last words will be, but our lives can reflect the light of Christ every day and the world will be a better place for that.