

Famous Last Words

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Matthew 28:16-20

Sermons Series:
In Christ Together
for the World
Gospel Endings

*“The best of
all: God is
with us.”*

- John Wesley

What well-known people say on their death beds intrigues me. Some people’s last words make me smile. In one version of Oscar Wilde’s last words, he was reported to have said, “Either the wallpaper goes or I do.” Conrad Hilton, founder of the Hilton Hotel chain, uttered these memorable words before he died: “Leave the shower curtain on the inside of the tub.” Mexican revolutionist Pancho Villa said, “Don’t let it end like this. Tell them I said something.” Louis XIV, King of France, upon seeing all his attendants crying by his bedside said, “Why are you weeping. Did you imagine that I was immortal?” What people say at the end can also be profound. Evangelist Henry Ward Beecher said, with his last dying breath, “Now comes the mystery.” Blasé Pascal uttered the heartfelt prayer, “May God never abandon me.” My favorite is one spoken by Methodist founder John Wesley: “The best of all: God is with us.”

Our Scripture lesson expresses Jesus’ famous last words. Jesus gathers his 11 disciples together (minus Judas) one last time. We call this passage in the church the Great Commission. Jesus

commissions his 11 disciples to go and make disciples of all nations.

The cosmic significance of this moment is captured in this little adjective, “all.” God has given Jesus *all* authority. Jesus’ disciples are to make disciples of *all* nations. Jesus teaches them to obey “*all* that I have commanded you.” Jesus signs off with the promise to be with his disciples *all* the time. Jesus has all authority to instruct his disciples to take the message to all nations by means of all obedience, assuring them that he is with them all the time.

Kitty Burns Florey wrote a book about the lost art of diagramming sentences. Diagramming is a visual technique designed to help students see how a sentence fits together. The subject of the sentence is placed on the left side of the line, the predicate is in middle position and the direct object is situated to the right side of the line. Independent clauses and prepositional phrases are graphed below the line. Given the frequency with which Americans butcher the English language, maybe we should bring diagramming sentences back into prominence.

The first step in diagramming a sentence is to identify

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the verb. Let's put verses 19-20 of our Scripture lesson on the screen. The main verb is to make disciples. Here the noun translated disciple has been converted into a verb, so literally the sentence reads, "Go and disciple all nations."

We talk a great deal in this church about being a disciple-making church. Our church's primary mission is making disciples of all nations. Our goal is not holding services, taking a collection or adding members; our mission, pure and simple, is making disciples.

The word disciple appears 269 times in the New Testament, while the term "Christian" appears only three times. Yet we've come to regard discipleship in the church as something optional. We treat discipleship as an accessory, in much the same way one would accessorize an outfit or a car. In the American church today, we have made it possible for us to be Christians without making any real progress toward becoming disciples.

We rely increasingly on social media today—Facebook, email and text messaging—to communicate with each other. Web-based communication has become an easy, accessible communication tool. Social media can also undermine healthy interpersonal relationships. Researchers tell us that 60-70 percent of all communication is non-verbal. Body posture, eye contact, gestures

and facial expressions are all essential to good communication. One UCLA study has concluded that 93 percent of all communication effectiveness is determined by non-verbal cues. When we rely on email or text messaging to communicate with each other, we miss non-verbal cues. We end up saying things in social media that we would never say to each other in person.

Stan Ott has written in one of his books about the seven healthy threads of good relationships in the church. One healthy thread is direct communication. He warns us against initiating significant issues with each other by means of email, text messaging and Facebook. We use social media primarily to communicate information and affirmation. We refrain from using it to express persuasion and confrontation. We don't copy others who are not immediately involved. Our goal in the body of Christ is direct, face-to-face communication.

For the last few months, there has been a blizzard of emails following the media coverage from sexual abuse that occurred here six years ago. I'm calling church leaders and members to fast from email and text messaging for the next two weeks. If you feel the urge to communicate with each other with social media, use our daily devotional as a discussion starter. If our goal is disciple-

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ship, then following Christ in social media is part of our disciple-making ambition.

We've established that making disciples is the main verb in the sentence. This primary verb is supported by three auxiliary verbs called participles. Participles are verbs that end in "ing." You grammar geeks should love this stuff! Auxiliary verbs serve to support and amplify the main verb.

Let's suppose a parent would say to a child, "Go and clean your room by vacuuming, dusting and picking up your clothes." Clean your room would be the main verb, while the participles vacuuming, dusting and picking up your clothes would explain how the cleaning will get done. These three auxiliary verbs—going, baptizing and teaching—explain what Jesus means by making disciples.

The first participle, "go," literally translates "as you are going." As you are going to work, school or on vacation, make disciples.

There was a time in American society when people used to come to church in greater numbers. Church-going used to be a regular feature of American life. There was a time when it could be said of churches in building projects, "If you build it, they will come." I would never dare say that today. Church attendance in the U.S. is plummeting. Western society

is becoming decidedly more secular.

If people don't come any longer, then we'd better go. Who are the people in your sphere of influence, family and friends in work or school with whom you have built trusting relationships? These are the people you have the greatest potential to reach with the message of Jesus Christ. As you are going, make disciples.

Our second participle, baptizing, originates from the Greek word baptize meaning to immerse or take under. Adult converts to Christ in the first century were typically baptized by immersion to signify dying to self and rising to new life in Christ. Baptism was administered during the season of Easter. What better time to symbolize our dying and rising to new life?

Since all Christian converts in the first century were first generation believers, adult baptism became standard practice. But how were second generation people marked with God's covenant? By the end of the first century, infants and children were also baptized in the church to express their membership in the covenant community of faith.

Jesus directs us to baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is one of the few places in the New Testament where the three members of the Trinity appear side-by-side. We'll come back to this

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confusing doctrine of the Trinity on Sunday, June 19th.

We regard baptism as a rather breezy rite of passage in the church today. Church is a place where you go to be baptized, marry and have your funeral. In church parlance, we call it “hatch, match and dispatch.” When people were baptized in the first century, it was a mark of genuine identification with Christ. In a culture that persecuted Christians, such identification could become a life or death matter. There was nothing breezy about it.

The third participle involves teaching them all that I have commanded you. Baptism had the effect of enrolling disciples into a lifetime of learning. This word teaching encapsulates all that Jesus taught his disciples. Jesus’ teaching is codified today in what we call the New Testament.

Scripture is our authority is one of this church’s three core beliefs. We don’t sit over Scripture, judging its content. Let’s see, I like this, but I don’t like that. Instead, we sit under Scripture. We don’t judge Scripture; Scripture judges us. We obey its precepts because Scripture has authority for our lives.

We urge you to invest time reading and meditating on Scripture so this Word can speak authoritatively into our lives. Maybe we don’t read the Bible because we know intuitively

we’re not going to like some of the things it will tell us. Scripture doesn’t flatter us or curry our favor. It tells us the truth!

Jesus concludes his Great Commission with the post-script, “And, remember, I am with you always.” The very first thing Matthew tells us about Jesus is that he will be called Immanuel, which means “God with us” (Matthew 1:22). Here in chapter 28, everything has come full circle. The very last thing Jesus says to his disciples is, “I am with you always.” If the first thing said about Jesus is also the last thing Jesus says to his disciples, then this “God with us” principle is pretty important to Jesus.

John Wesley had it right: the best of all: God is with us. Jesus doesn’t promise to rescue us from all danger. Bad things happen to faithful, God-loving people. We are not spared the ravages of illness or the agony of death. Yet, the most persistent Biblical promise, from beginning to end in Matthew’s gospel, is that God is with us. God said to his people, “I will never leave or forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5). “The best of all: God is with us.”