

“LAST WORDS AT THE LAST SUPPER”
1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35
A Sermon by John Thomason
Woodbury UMC
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There are no words so final as the words of a dying man. Over the Sundays in Lent, we’ve listened again to the seven last words of Christ as he dies on the cross. But lest we forget, there are other occasions during Holy Week when Jesus speaks final words. He is going places, doing things, and encountering people for the last time, hours and days before his crucifixion, and he has some last things to say in these moments as well.

Case in point: only one of Jesus’ disciples manages to be present at Calvary on Good Friday; there, Jesus seizes the opportunity to speak final words to that disciple, John: “Here is your mother.” However, all of the disciples are present the night before when Jesus presides over the Passover feast in the Upper Room. Jesus knows this is his farewell meal with the twelve, so he offers words of farewell – sort of a last will and testament – and these words are worth pondering, too, just like his words from the cross.

Put yourself in this situation. If you knew you were sharing a last supper with family and friends, what last words would you offer? Remembrances? Regrets? Requests? Blessings? Benedictions?

My grandfather on my mother’s side, Edgar Cain, retired in the mid-1960’s from a managerial position with a public utilities company in west Texas. His co-workers and relatives gathered one evening for what we might have called a “last supper.” My mom and her young family, including me, drove 400 miles to be there. After we consumed roast beef, scalloped potatoes, and chocolate cake, there were memories shared, testimonials offered, and gifts given.

As you may have guessed, this was a retirement dinner – a time of closure, to be sure, but it was primarily a time of thanksgiving and celebration. There was nothing foreboding, much less morbid, about it. My grandfather was retiring, not dying. I have no recollection of what he said when his turn came to speak that night, but I’m sure it was something fitting. Knowing Granddaddy, he spoke words of gratitude in a spirit of humility, with touches of humor sprinkled throughout.

Perhaps this is not a good analogy to the last words of Jesus at his last supper. For both Jesus and my grandfather, an important relationship was ending, but my grandfather’s life was not ending. Jesus faces a very different situation on Maundy Thursday – a situation more like the last meal of a condemned criminal on death row. In an ironic gesture of compassion, the convict has his choice of the finest food – steak and lobster, if he wishes – but it’s hardly a case of “eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you may die.” Tomorrow he will die. If he has last words to speak at his last supper, they will be spoken to a last remnant of companions, to a prison guard or a chaplain, or perhaps only to God.

Jesus’ last words at his last supper are clearly recorded for posterity. We hear them every Maundy Thursday and on every Communion Sunday; but for that very reason we have a tendency to let them go in one ear and out the other. Have you and I ever stopped to ponder what Jesus is really saying here?

We actually have two versions of Jesus' farewell speech to the disciples in the Upper Room. In the synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – Jesus takes two traditional elements of the Passover feast, partaken in memory of Israel's exodus from Egypt, and transforms them into symbols of another kind of feast that will be celebrated in his memory. He interprets these symbols with words, which we call “words of institution,” because Jesus is instituting a new sacred meal. The Last Supper becomes the Lord's Supper, a meal for the ages narrated by immortal words.

In his letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul summarizes Jesus' actions and words as they are reported in Matthew, Mark, and Luke: “The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me’” (1 Corinthians 11:23b-25).

Notice that Jesus' last words at the last supper begin on a note of thanksgiving. Of course, to some degree he is just following the Passover script, reciting a Hebrew version of “God is great, God is good, let us thank him for our food.” But in this instance, the food and drink which Jesus blesses aren't just the customary bread and wine; they represent his broken body and shed blood. You would think that instead of thanking God, he would be questioning God or even cursing God. It takes grace and courage for Jesus to speak words of gratitude when he knows he is about to be betrayed, deserted, and put to death. He is called upon to perform a thankless act – dying on a cross – but still finds it within himself to give thanks. So once again, Jesus is teaching us how to pray. When you and I are tempted to make our prayers a long litany of complaints and requests, we need to recall that Jesus thanks God for everything before he asks God for anything – even for strength to endure suffering and death.

Here at the Table, Jesus asks nothing of God, but he does ask something of his disciples. He asks them to repeat this meal after he is gone, and as they repeat it, to remember him who gave it to them in the first place. “Do this . . . in remembrance of me.” You and I shouldn't be surprised by this request. Like anyone approaching death, Jesus is thinking about his legacy. He wants to be remembered, not forgotten; but notice that he wants to be remembered in a certain way.

A lot of people construct their own memorials before they die. They do it with flattering portraits, impressive buildings, or large bequests of money. When I lived in Houston, Texas, I became aware that institutions all over town bore the name of Jesse Jones, a wealthy entrepreneur and politician who became one of that city's greatest benefactors. In donating all this money to build hospitals and libraries and symphony halls, was Jesse Jones just a generous guy, or was he trying to buy immortality?

Now, in all fairness, there is nothing wrong with wanting to be remembered after one dies. Jesus, too, wants to be remembered; and, God knows, he gets his wish, but in ways he never imagined or planned. Jesus is remembered throughout the world in mammoth cathedrals, in priceless paintings and statues and stained glass, in stately hymns and grand oratorios. But here at the Last Supper, he tells his disciples he wants to be remembered in a more modest way, in a simple meal that bears a profound message – a message of self-giving and sacrifice. He's saying, “When you eat this bread and drink this cup, remember what it signifies; remember what it cost me to give it to you. Remember me, but remember that I did it for you.” These are Jesus' last words at the last supper, according to Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

When we turn to the Gospel of John, we get a very different narrative of the final meal. In John, certain actions are performed in the Upper Room, but they are different actions than those reported in the synoptic Gospels. Certain words are spoken, but they are different words. In John, there is no institution of a new sacred feast; instead, there is the institution a new form of service. Jesus, the Master of the house, reverses roles by washing the feet of those who are normally his servants. Then he instructs his disciples to do as he has done, to wash each other's feet. He sums up this expectation in a new commandment: "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35).

As in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, so in John: Jesus' last act at the last supper is an act of self-giving love; but in John, Jesus's last words are a mandate to his followers to love as he loves. This is not what any of us have bargained for. You and I would prefer just to put Jesus on a pedestal as a one-of-a-kind wonder; but he wants us to emulate him, to model ourselves after him as loving servants.

As if this weren't challenging enough, he specifies precisely who we are called to love and serve – not the world in general, not strangers at a safe distance, but people sitting to our left and to our right, people alongside whom we worship and work, Christian people with whom we sometimes disagree and bicker. We are called to "love one another" in this mongrel family called the Church. We are called to wash feet that look very familiar and are sometimes not pretty or clean.

During my seminary years in Louisville, Kentucky, I belonged to a large church located just up the hill from our school campus. The membership was mostly blue-blood – seminary professors and students, highly competent professionals, movers and shakers in the community. But the most distinctive member of that church did not fit any of these descriptions. His name was John Day. He was a tiny wisp of a man who had been mentally handicapped since birth, walked with a limp, and spoke with a severe speech impediment. But amazingly enough, he found acceptance from the people in that church with whom he had nothing in common but a common love for Jesus Christ.

It was the pastor of the church, John Claypool, who modeled that acceptance. Dr. Claypool was a master preacher who later in his career delivered the Lyman Beecher lectures on preaching at Yale Divinity School. When he spoke from the pulpit, everyone sat on the edge of their seats, including John Day, who – wouldn't you know – always took a front row seat!

John Day did not possess a keen sense of what was "proper" behavior in a worship service. He was childlike, spontaneous, and unfiltered. If he thought something, he said it; if he felt something, he expressed it. And so, on occasion, when there was a brief lull in the flow of worship, John Day would cry out to John Claypool, "I love you, John." The congregation would snicker nervously and wait with bated breath for the preacher's response. And every time this happened, with no trace of awkwardness or irritation or condescension, John Claypool would reply to his admirer, "I love you, too, John." And you could tell that he meant it, that he respected this broken man as his equal and even looked up to him. The humble servant, John Day, was sitting at the feet of the great John Claypool, but it was John Claypool who washed the feet of John Day.

I try to remember that scene every time I struggle to love a fellow Christian who is different or difficult, someone with whom I strongly disagree, someone I'm tempted to regard as beneath me in aptitude or appearance or intelligence. If the Lord of the universe stoops to be a loving servant, why shouldn't I?

When you and I go to a workshop, attend a class, or hear a lecture, we're always looking for a "takeaway" – you know, a nugget of truth we can stick into our pockets and pull out and use when we get home. Well, this is our takeaway from Jesus' last supper with his disciples. His last words are: "Do this in remembrance of me" . . . "Love one another as I have loved you" . . . "Wash one another's feet." If you and I can't summon the courage to take up a cross, can we at least take up a towel? Does anyone have a towel handy?