

## **Famous Last Words**

### **John 13:31-35**

When he had gone out,

Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified,  
and God has been glorified in him.

If God has been glorified in him,

God will also glorify him in himself  
and will glorify him at once.

Little children, I am with you only a little longer.

You will look for me;

and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you,  
‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.

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.”

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John 13:31-35

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### **I.**

I have spent a lot of time in cemeteries of late. First, in finding the gravesite of Martha and Gilbert Manley then, later, in laying flowers from our church on Martha's headstone last Sunday. Owing to Mother's Day, the week prior Linda and I took a quick trip down to Allegany, NY (near Olean) to visit Linda's mother, Francie, and take her to dinner, then up to Buffalo the following day to take my mother, Nancy, out to dinner as well.

One of our first stops was to the cemetery there in Allegany, where we met up with Linda's cousin, Toni, who showed us the gravesites of *five* generations of Linda's family. We also visited our own cemetery plots, located there and purchased a few years ago, which is where Linda and I will someday be buried; right next to my mother-in-law, though I'm still not sure how she *really* feels about that.

### **II.**

We've already decided the words which will be inscribed on our headstone. Under my name it will say, "He loved her more." Under Linda's name it will say, "She loved him more." Which is kind of a running joke between us. Fitting, though; and a nice problem to have.

Of course, all of this got me thinking of words and sentiments which come to us at the end; hence the title of today's sermon (tongue firmly in cheek): "Famous Last Words." This morning, I'd like to share with you the last words of some famous people.

**Groucho Marx:** "This is no way to live!"

**Sir Winston Churchill:** "I'm bored with it all."

Poet **Emily Dickinson**, "I must go in, for the fog is rising."

**Steve Jobs:** "Oh wow. Oh wow. Oh wow."

**Thomas Edison:** "It is very beautiful over there."

**Bob Marley:** "Money can't buy life."

### III.

**Leonardo da Vinci:** “I have offended God and mankind because my work did not reach the quality it should have.”

**Margaret Sanger:** Birth control advocate, “A party! Let’s have a party.”

**W.C. Fields:** when asked why he was reading the Bible on his deathbed replied, “I’m looking for loopholes.”

**Michelangelo:** “I’m still learning.”

**Marco Polo:** “I have not told half of what I saw.”

**Charlie Chaplin:** “Why not? After all, it belongs to him.” When responding to a priest who said, “May the Lord have mercy on his soul.”

**Alfred Hitchcock:** “One never knows the ending. One has to die to know exactly what happens after death, although Catholics have their hopes.”

**Ludwig van Beethoven:** “Friends applaud, the comedy is finished.”

**George Harrison:** “Love one another.”

### IV.

Turns out that George, the so-called “quiet Beatle“ actually “borrowed” these words from Jesus, the so-called “Messiah.” This morning’s scripture reading is taken from John chapter 13 which recounts the events of the Last Supper. What is so interesting about *John’s* retelling of this seminal moment, is he scarcely mentions the actual meal at all. Instead, the entire narrative is given over to Jesus’ act of washing the feet of the disciples.

Though some may lament the often inconsistent and, even, contradictory versions of the life of Jesus found across the four Gospels, what a delight to have this fundamentally different perspective on the Last Supper. One is made to wonder how the church would have been made manifest over the course of the last two centuries if foot-washing had become the primary Sacrament and the focus of our theological understanding of his famous last words: “Love one another.”

### V.

While it could have simply been the case of majority rule, with 3 of 4 Gospel writers focusing on the bread and the cup and only one writer on the basin and towel, we can well imagine that certain practicalities also came into play

in deciding which part of the evening would be most emphasized. It is far easier (not to mention much less time-consuming) to dole out bread and wine in remembrance of Him, than to have a priest wash the feet of an congregation. Historically, though, the Church rarely gave itself over to thoughts of making the practice of faith less onerous; quite the opposite, in fact.

Pushing the question even further, why was it an “either-or” proposition? In deciding the church’s sacraments, signs of grace instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, seven were eventually decided upon: Baptism, Eucharist, Confirmation, Reconciliation (Confession), Holy Orders, Anointing of the Sick and Matrimony. Why not the addition of an 8th, foot-washing?

## **VI.**

This is not an insignificant question to ask, especially if we are to most fully understand Jesus’ famous last words: “Love one another.” The answer, I would assert, has to do with the human predilection for power and pain over humility and service. In administering each of these seven sacraments, the early church centralized its power and strengthened its hold in society. If you wanted sins forgiven, to be married, receive last rites at death, not have your soul damned to hell, hoped to go to heaven, join the dominant societal institution or share in its leadership, the Church held all the cards.

While it is certainly important to honor the sacrifices of Christ, especially in dying on the cross for the atonement of sin to redeem the world, the exultation of, and admonishment to imitate, the pain and humiliation of that cross only serves to appeal to our most base instinct; that is to say, what is most relatable to us as we labor under our own pain and fears.

## **VII.**

Moreover, and with an irony most pitiable, such an emphasis misses the whole *point* of the cross: Christ sacrificed to *free* us from enslavement rather than as a means to further tighten the chains which bind us. Which is why in our Reformed Tradition, we display the symbol of the empty cross, rather than the crucifix; emphasizing life and hope over death and despair.

Even more significant, however, a sacrament of foot-washing would remind us of Christ’s call to a humility without debasement, and to service others by

distributing and sharing power rather than consolidating and isolating it within the hands of a relative few. Though in no way related to foot-washing, in specific, the 16th century Reformation arose out of the realization that the ecclesiastical river was running backward, up-hill against the gravity of our theology; first with Martin Luther in Germany, then in Switzerland with John Calvin the forebear of our own Reformed Tradition.

## **VIII.**

John Calvin, a French theological, was a rather interesting and odd fellow. The early reforms he instituted in Geneva called for religious authority over moral behavior, and sought to make the Church and its clergy independent of state control; bringing radical reform to church structure which was to be ruled by Elders (the Greek word for elder is *presbyter*),

His Reformed Theology, as in the church reformed always reforming, asserted the absolute authority of God and has five principle points: the total depravity of humans, predestination, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints. The Reformed Tradition also reduced the number of sacraments from seven to just the two understood to be instituted by Jesus himself: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Again, foot-washing did not make the cut.

## **IX.**

Frankly, I think foot-washing is far too intimate of an act to have ever risen to the level of sacrament, or to ever be put into widespread practice (though some churches certainly do it from time to time). Which is fine, as our tradition understands sacraments to be merely signs and seals of what God has already done for us. As is the case with all symbols, sacraments point *beyond* themselves to a larger and deeper meaning which is not the symbol or the sacrament in and of itself.

While all sacraments, the original seven of the Roman Catholic Church and the short list of two short-listed by the Protestants, essentially point to the same thing, foot-washing is the most poignant embodiment of Jesus' famous last words which are to be a new commandment to us: love one another.

## **X.**

On that transformative night so long ago, Jesus gathered with his friends and family, just as we gather here today, and said:

*“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.”*

That is, if we wash each other’s feet, people will know we belong to God through Christ.

Now, I’ve been here with you a good long while. Together we’ve undertaken and accomplished a great many wonderful things, seen wonders both large and small made manifest in our midst, and been made to wonder time and again at the scope and depth of God’s grace. In all these years, however, our feet have remained ensconced in socks and shoes. The truth is, though, we are washing each other’s feet all the time by simple virtue of loving one another just as Christ first loved us; which is the larger and deeper meaning.

## **XI.**

As fate, luck and the mysterious moving of the Spirit would have it, today is an occasion for famous last words. As is the case with every parting, it is with a mixture sadness and rejoicing that we bid farewell to Dave and Ellen MacMaster about to begin a new chapter in their lives together in the wilderness of Ohio.

I will admit to my reluctance at accepting the reality of their departure, as I do not wish it to be so. In some ways, it seems as if they *only* just arrived, while in other ways it seems as if they have *always* been here. One thing, though, of which I am absolutely certain, is that they will abide with us in our hearts forever. Dave and Ellen have been wonderful additions to the Island of Misfit Toys which is our church: the bears, the choir, the cross-country motorcycle trip, Ellen’s flute playing and Dave’s unflappable “can do” spirit. They have washed our feet at every opportunity.

## **XII.**

Dave and Ellen, on behalf of the entire congregation, your friends and spiritual family, we bid you fond farewell and offer you both our profound thanks for being part of our church and part of our lives. We will hold you in our tender thoughts and heart-felt prayers as you begin this new time in your

life together. Though for awhile you will surely be strangers in a strange land, we know God is leading you to a promised land; a good land flowing with milk and honey, with roads straight and smooth and a *much* longer motorcycle riding season. In having your camp on Pleasant Lake, we rejoice in knowing you may return to us from time to time. May you always dwell in God's irresistible grace, and continue to embody the perseverance of the saints. Our famous last words to you are these: We love you. Amen.