

Lectionary 23C (Pr 18)
Grace Lutheran Church
Lakeland, FL
Sept 4, 2022

Deut 30:15-20
Psalm 1
Philemon 1-21
Luke 14:25-33

Grace to you and peace from God and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Please pray with me. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

There is something about last words, isn't there. Sometimes they are spoken at a deathbed, other times as one retires, or relocates to a distant place. We hold on to those words sometimes with tenderness and sometimes with passion and even anger as we part ways.

Try out these last words – I'll give the words and you tell me the speaker

Frankly my dear, I don't give a damn – Rhett Butler

I have found it impossible to carry the heavy burden of responsibility . . . without the help and support of the woman I love. *Edward VIII, King of England - Abdication speech, 1936*

Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as President. *Lyndon Baines Johnson*

I shall return. *General Douglas MacArthur,*

Good night, and God bless. *Red Skelton*

And that's the way it is, March 6, 1981 *Walter Cronkite*

And sometimes the last words are a bit of a pivot point -- imagine the runners in a relay race, handing off the baton – RUN HARD!

And so it is in today's reading from Deuteronomy. Moses has led the people for forty years – as long as it took for them to be formed from a motley group of people enslaved by the Egyptians. He led them from Egypt through the wilderness right up to the threshold of the Land of Promise across the Jordan River. And he had been told that he himself would not cross over in to the land but instead Joshua, the son of Nun, who was full of wisdom, would lead them into Canaan which they then would possess.

The book of Deuteronomy is a series of three sermons that Moses gives to the people, we refer to this as a farewell discourse. In these sermons, he exhorts the people to adhere to the law, that which binds them together as the people of God. He reminds them of the covenant that God made with them – first to their forebears Abraham and Sarah and then generation upon generation to them as well. He gives them warnings about faithlessness and urges them to be faithful. And in today's reading we hear what may be the culmination of these sermons. He says to the assembly – look, before you is life and good on one hand and evil and death on the other. Choose life.

A few weeks ago we noted that following Jesus can be hard – but it isn't complicated. Today, we hear that there is an obvious choice to be made – will it be life or will it be death? But that choice may not be simple. It was many years ago, Tuesday, February 13th. Our oldest was a young boy thinking about Valentine's Day the next day. And there was a sweet girl in his class whom he wanted to remember in a special way. The problem was that it was after 8:00 and we were getting ready to take him and his brother back to their mother's home. But we thought we could make a quick trip to the drug store where he might find something for her. We walked the aisles of candies and cards and Valentine knick knacks. I held up one thing after another. He cocked his head to one side and then went to look at something else. After several minutes and aware of the time ticking by, I asked him what he thought. He paused for a moment and then said this – Decisions decisions and I feel so small. Making a choice was not simple for him.

And so in today's Gospel. Remember that Jesus is making his last trip to Jerusalem and he knows what is waiting for him there. And along the way, he is touching and healing and loving. And the crowds are following him amazed at what they were seeing and hearing. And along the way Jesus is teaching them – last week in the verses immediately before today's he told them about inviting all to the banquet – the lame, the blind, the sick, the oppressed – all are welcome. He had engaged in some lively and some might even say heated conversation with the powers that be who took issue with some of the things that Jesus was doing. And the crowds loved it because they saw someone challenging the heavy hand of ritual and scrupulous keeping of the law that weighed down so heavily upon them. And they followed him. Throngs and crowds. Wondering at this rabbi.

And then Jesus turned to them and said – do you want to follow me? Really follow me? The choice is obvious. And perhaps not so simple. Decisions decisions. This is what following me means – I have to come first in your life. The text says that one must “hate” one's own family – but the word there doesn't really mean the emotion of hatred or detesting someone. Rather the word applies to priority-setting. If there is a to-do list of 10 items, one must be first. It's obvious, isn't it – that one who comes first is Jesus, right? But it may not be so simple. He goes on to say that we must even hate our own life. This is not some sort of death wish at all. Life here refers to that which makes each of us unique – our identity. Pam, a Sadie loving, picture taking, travel bug. Choice – follow Jesus? Or hold fast to my life? The choice seems obvious, but it isn't so simple, is it.

Now, I must say that this is daunting to me – God, really?? I need to ignore my cat, stop taking photos of things I love, rip up my passport? God, I'm not so sure about this. Maybe I'm not worthy of being your follower. Where's the good news here preacher??

Here it is – wait for it – by grace you have been saved through faith, and this not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works so that no one may boast. Who is it who was invited to the great banquet we heard about last week? It was the poor and the lame and the blind; those who could not keep that social balance of be invited and then you must invite. Receive and you must return. That's how society keeps accurate accounts. IF this, THEN that. But not so in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Instead, BECAUSE of God's saving action in our lives, THEREFORE we are called to make a response – and even this response also is a gift. Dr. Luther's explanation to the Third Article of

the Apostles' Creed – the one that deals with the Holy Spirit goes like this – I know that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in the Lord Jesus Christ or come to him. But instead the Holy Spirit calls, gathers and enlightens me through the gospel just as she calls, gathers and enlightens the whole Christian Church. My beloved ones in Jesus – you are saved not by what you have done or not done. You are loved by God and nothing will change that.

And BECAUSE of this love, we are called in the waters of our baptisms to live into this love, not in isolation but together for the sake of the world. Moses told the people of God to love God, walk in God's ways, hold fast to God. The prophet Isaiah told people to loosen the bonds of wickedness, let the oppressed be free, share food with the hungry. The prophet Micah told the people that God calls us to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. And Jesus tells us to give food to the hungry, water to the thirsty, clothing to the naked.

You see, this life into which we have been called is not a passive one of sitting back and luxuriating in grace. Because of God's grace, because we have been washed in the font, because we are fed at the table, because of all of this and so much more, therefore, we love Jesus and follow him because he is the most important one in our life.

Moses' last words – I have set before you this day life and good and also death and evil.

Choose life.

Would you please pray with me.

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go forth with good courage not knowing where we go but only that your hand is leading us and your love is supporting us; through Jesus' holy name. Amen.