



A REHEARSAL OF TRUST

May 8, 2016, The Seventh Sunday after Easter

John 17: 20-26

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Last words, sometimes famous last words, those words that are uttered on one's deathbed, are inherently intriguing. I think this is so because we wonder if someone so close to heading to that distant shore of eternity might be able to communicate the slightest glimpse of what they see approaching. We listen in hopes of wisdom, of insight, of promise for what is to come. If it is one who is beloved to us, we listen for one last chance to hear that precious voice.

Last words can express a continued fight for life. The revolutionary war General Ethan Allen, upon being told by his doctor, "General, I fear the angels are waiting for you" replied, "Waiting are they? Waiting are they? Well—let 'em wait!" They can be poignant, profound, and compelling. James Joyce's final proclamation was "Does nobody understand?" They can express love and devotion, Napoleon's last word was, "Josephine." Or they can be witty. My personal favorite is Oscar Wilde's quip, "Either this wallpaper goes or I do."

In our scripture text this morning we do not exactly get Jesus' last words in the gospel of John. But we do get the closing verses of his final prayer to God. John tells us these are the last words Jesus offers up to God during his earthly life. As his death quickly approaches, he prays fervently for his disciples. He prays to God about how he has protected his followers and given them the Word of God. And he calls upon God to continue to watch over them and lead them to faithfulness.

And then the prayer takes an interesting turn. In this morning's text we hear Jesus pray not only for his disciples but also for all of his followers who are to come. "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me



through their word that they may all be one.” He is praying for the generations to come who will be taught what he has shared.

Even under the shadow of death, Jesus’ line of vision is well beyond himself. And in this case, even well beyond those that surround him in his current time and place. He has run up to the very limits of his mortality. I suppose he has a choice to make at this juncture. He could mourn the limits of what he has been able to accomplish in his days on earth and be filled with fear for what is to come. Or he could entrust the future, his future, the disciples’ future, the future of all humanity, to God.

Clearly he chooses to entrust all to God. In the Gospel of John, Jesus and God are eternally intertwined. We hear it in the words of this prayer, “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you...” As Jesus approaches his death in Matthew and Luke, he prays to God in anguish to have his cup of suffering removed if possible. In Mark, Jesus on the cross cries out asking why God has abandoned him. None of this occurs in John. There is no gap between God, the beloved parent, and Jesus the Son. Jesus is filled with radical trust for all that is to come. Jesus’ final words on the cross, his last words, are, “It is finished.” He has accomplished what he was called by God to do and trusts in all that will come.

In the very first chapter of John we are told that Jesus has been present at God’s side from the very beginning, all of creation comes into being through him. In fancy theological talk we call this a high Christology. It is inspiring to hear of how, even in mortal form, Jesus never loses his direct connection to the rest of God.

But I have to tell you, from a role model perspective, I do not find this all that helpful. Most of us do not have the presence of God on tap for ourselves as we move through our days. With some amalgam of grace and effort we are open to recognizing and receiving the presence of God in our midst, sometimes, in scattered moments; moments that are quite often fleeting and oftentimes frustrating in their ephemerality. We are told God is always with us. We tacitly believe God



is always with us. But I am not convinced we own that truth. Most likely we live in some middle ground of belief, wanting to believe, trying to believe, but never fully getting there.

Several years ago I shared this from Tom Are, who is a friend and colleague of Michael and mine's, but it bears repeating. Tom gave me a helpful way to envision this middle ground territory of belief. He replaced the word belief with the word trust. He writes, "Trust is a better word than belief. Belief so often never gets out of our heads; trust shows up in how we live."

Tom goes on to tell this brief story. "We took a family trip to the Grand Canyon several summers ago. I had never been. It is amazing. The views are breath taking. Even more than the views, there was one thing that completely took me by surprise. Did you know they have no guardrails on the Grand Canyon? You can walk right up to the edge, if you are that type. Turns out, I am not that type. It turns out that I trust gravity. I don't believe in gravity; I trust gravity... What we trust shows up in how we live."

Tom was confident enough in the reality and power of gravity that he would not risk tumbling over the side of the Grand Canyon. He goes on to admit he does not always put the same level of concrete trust in Jesus. "I trust Jesus, except when I don't. I walk where he walks, except when I notice the winds. I follow, but I prefer some distance."

Jesus promises to close the distance, to cross the divide, to bridge any gap we may feel between us and the divine. As I quoted before, he prays, "As you, Father, are in me and I am in you..." and then he goes on to say, "may they also be in us." As vividly clear as John's portrait is of the inseparability of God and Jesus, so does John's Jesus continually include us in the close-knit family portrait.

We receive a deep and abiding promise that we too will experience such unity with God and in turn with each other. Jesus prays to God, "I in them and you in me, that they may be completely one." In John, everyone, divine and human, is



inexorably linked, and through this unity all promises of God's victory and our futures are assured.

Now it is all well and good to nod our heads as we hear Jesus make this promise, but how do we begin to own it the way we own the truth that gravity exists when we look down over the side of a cliff? I am reminded of the very old joke of how one gets to Carnegie Hall. A lost tourist in midtown stops a woman on the street and asks her, "How do I get to Carnegie Hall?" She replies, "Practice, practice, practice." We need to practice trusting in this promise of God's abiding presence with us today and in every day that is to ever come. We need to rehearse our trust in the reality that our futures are indeed assured in God.

And this is precisely what we just did several minutes ago as we gathered around that baptismal font. As we welcomed those six precious little ones into the household of God. We rehearsed the reality that small as they may be they have already been assured to journey with Christ beyond death and on to resurrection. And that in every step of this life they will never be without the presence of God. We rehearsed the reality that as a community we share in this remarkable promise of a destination in the divine. We rehearsed the reality that our future is guaranteed in God.

Whenever I speak with parents I am always struck by the slightly bittersweet nature of raising a child. Again and again, parents are called to watch their children's lives expand beyond them and beyond their safe control. Mothers and fathers are challenged by those first tearful days of separation that come with pre-school. Entrusting precious children to the care of others. And on it goes, one boundary to the next. Off they go to all-day school, and weeklong summer camp. And then comes college and careers that often take them across the country and even across the globe. Each and every new milestone a joy and a trepidation for mothers and fathers for what the future might hold for their beloved children. And, yes, prayers are offered to God that they be happy and healthy, safe and fulfilled in every aspect of their lives. But the worry is always there in the background.



Today at the baptismal font we rehearsed the trust that Jesus had in God that the future was indeed assured. As he was preparing to die, he turned over his disciples to God's care. And not only them, but generation upon generation of disciples to come. Jesus stood so close to God, his beloved parent, that he could indeed catch a glimpse of a sprawling vista of all that was and is to come. He saw a future that did not promise to be devoid of challenges and tragedies, but one that was ironclad in God's abiding presence with us for all eternity.

As Brick Church prepares to celebrate two hundred and fifty years of faithfulness next year, it is natural that we wonder what the future holds for this community. We can and will pray for those generations to come. And we will rehearse trusting in God deeply enough to be assured of the divine presence in all that is to come for the children of this church and the children of the children of this church. Each and every one, and all of us together finding a home in that family portrait with God, the beloved parent, Jesus Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Thanks be to God. Amen.