

Turn Around
Luke 24:36b-48

There have been many collections made of the last words of well-known people. I ran across a collection of last words recently. When I was a younger, I thought death would hold such a sway upon people's soul that in their last minutes they would act profoundly, differently, even better than their normal, daily selves. Turns out, you learn, that just isn't so. Last words more often reflect the personalities and humor of the individuals more deeply.

Voltaire, a French Enlightenment writer, historian, and philosopher known for his wit and criticism of Christianity, reportedly said, when asked by a priest to renounce Satan, "This is no time to make new enemies."

Oscar Wilde, an Irish poet and playwright, said, "Either that wallpaper goes, or I do."

You would think that people confronted with their last few moments on earth would want to say something memorable, something important, something lasting.

Consider Jesus' last words, as recorded in our lesson from Luke's Gospel. Luke tells us Jesus opened his disciples' minds to understand the scriptures, and then said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses to these things. And behold I send the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city, until you are clothed with power from on high."

These were words that Christ meant for his disciples to remember. These were words that summed up his mission and theirs. It is interesting what part of his ministry he chose to emphasize with these last words.

Without this passage, we might assume that his final message to his disciples would be, Love one another. Obviously, no one loved like Jesus. And he taught love as the central ethic of life. But that was not the message he centered on in his last instructions to the church. And this is critical. If we preach only the love of Christ, people might think that the Gospel is a touchy-feely kind of message with no real power to transform lives. Love is at the center of our message, but it is not the complete message. There is something more.

At the beginning of the New Testament, we encounter John the Baptist preaching a message of repentance. It is a very stark message, an unrelenting message. We would like to paint a contrast between John and Jesus. John was a rough-hewn backwoodsman, while Jesus was a more urbane rabbi. John was hard; Jesus was soft. John preached repentance; Jesus preached grace. The historical evidence does not support such a position, however. Jesus in his teaching was just as demanding sometimes even more demanding than John. At his baptism Jesus identified himself with John's message of repentance. It was a consistent theme throughout his ministry.

But he also preached forgiveness. In fact, he boldly says to one man, "Your sins ARE forgiven." That really steamed the temple crowd that he should claim authority to forgive sins. But that was the second part of his overall message: Repent and receive forgiveness for your sins. And this is the central message that we as the church are to proclaim to the world: Repent and receive God's forgiveness. However, since these two words repentance and forgiveness have lost much of their power to modern men and women, let's phrase them in a different way. Let's begin with repentance.

The first message we proclaim from Christ is this: IN WHAT DIRECTION IS YOUR LIFE HEADED? That is, everyone's life has a direction and sometimes that direction is not desirable. For example, from time to time we encounter someone who is becoming more bitter with every day that passes. You've known people like that. Somewhere along the way something has caused them to sour on life. And rather than seeing the folly of such a depressing attitude, rather than acknowledging that they ought to do something about their outlook before it drives everyone away from them, they seem to nurture that negative attitude and ever more tightly it pulls them into its grasp. We want to say to such a person, "Turn around! Turn around before it is too late."

For your own spiritual welfare, turn around." All of us need to examine our lives from time to time and ask the question, "Where am I headed in life? If I continue in the direction I'm headed, will it take me where God means for me to be?"

Daniel Defoe, the author of ROBINSON CRUSOE, ran away from home and went to sea as a young man. His father protested young Defoe's plans, and his mother wept. But Defoe was determined to have his way. On his very first voyage out, his ship was wrecked, and young Defoe barely escaped with his life. He saw his foolishness and the bad choice he had made, but he was afraid to go back home because he knew his friends would make fun of him. Remembering how he felt, Defoe concluded that people are not ashamed of sin, but they are ashamed to repent.

That's an interesting thought. We are more ashamed of changing directions than we are continuing in the wrong direction in life. Studies in psychology reinforce that idea. These studies show that once we have decided on a course of action, particularly a dubious course of action, we will build up all kinds of rationalizations to justify that course of action. And the more others point out our faults, the more we feel the need to justify our behavior. Our pride becomes involved, and we harden in our justifications until we get to the point that we will fight rather than switch even when we know what we are doing is stupid beyond belief.

And the message comes from Christ and from those who love us, "Turn around. Please, for your own sake and for the sake of those who love you most, before it is too late, turn around." Has anyone ever heard those words before? Have you ever been tempted to ask that of someone else? We all need to hear them from time to time. That's the first message Christ has for us. Turn around.

Here is the second: HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT YOUR LIFE SO FAR? Do you have any regrets? Do you look back over your life and wish you had done some things differently? Most people's lives have a secret here or there. Most of us have some part of our lives we wouldn't particularly want to share with our children or our spouse or our parents. Most of us can look at our lives and say, "Gee, I didn't handle that relationship quite like I should" or "I wish I hadn't said THAT" or "I wish I had spent more time here and less time over there" or "If only I could go back and live THAT PART of my life over again."

Unresolved guilt is one of the great problems in people's lives. It manifests itself in physical disorders, sleeplessness, depression, and numerous problems in building relationships. And most of us are not even aware that it is a problem. Because we are confused about the nature of sin, we aren't aware of our need for forgiveness. Sin is any brokenness in our lives. It is any transgression against the love of someone else or the love of God. Sin manifests itself anytime we have used another person. It even manifests itself when we have not lived up to our full potential as children of God. All of us have regrets about the way we have lived our lives, and I am able to say to you on behalf of our Lord Jesus Christ, "You are forgiven. The past is past. It is gone forever. Today is a new day and you can be a new person. You don't have to live out that old self-defeating script anymore. You are forgiven."

Those, then, are the two messages Jesus means for the church to proclaim to the world, "Turn around" and "You are forgiven. The past is past. This is a new day."