

Message Delivered at Christ Church
Saturday & Sunday, April 2nd & 3rd, 2011
TEXT: Luke 19:1-28 “The Big Read”
Delivered by Paul A. Johnson

There is something unusually powerful about final words. It seems that it's the last words from the great persons of history that seem most poignant. Presidents Washington and Eisenhower are more known for the final things they said in their presidencies than in what they said during their presidencies. The words of Lincoln's Second Inaugural resonate throughout the ages not simply because of their beauty and what they say, but because they became his final words. And the prophetic truth remains of Martin Luther King, Jr a few days before his own end proclaiming that he had been to the mountaintop and seen the Promised Land.

But the power of final words is true on more intimate levels, as well. We remember the final words of conversations that matter more easily than we remember what came before because usually it takes time in a conversation to get to what matters. Or for me, how in my own household, I'm always a bit uncomfortable when a departure happens so quickly that we don't have the time to say "I love you" to one another because we want one another to know that throughout the day. And more than once I've heard "The last thing she said was..." or "the last thing he said was..."

Final words are important; powerful; and sometimes they are chosen carefully.

There's an exercise we have probably all done, either in the privacy of our own heart or maybe, even, with someone else...what do we want to pass on most distinctly to those who come after us? Through successes...and more through failures...we've all learned truths worth sharing. And through the mercy of other much more than by ourselves, we've all received wisdom worth sharing. And we all have those in our lives who come after us...friends, and grandchildren, and children...So what's the one thing we would teach? The one thing we would offer, remembering that what comes near the end is often what gets remembered most powerfully...

So the final sentence in this passage we heard today from Luke is this: "After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem."

We've been reading and studying Luke together now for a total of four months. We hope it's been a blessing to you; that along the way you've heard Jesus saying something new to you. And we hope you'll give us some feedback along the way; that you'll let us know how it's worked for you, and what we could do better were we to have the chance to do this again.

And as you know by now, Jerusalem and all that it symbolizes means something special to Luke. And we know by now that a theme in the Gospel is the journey of Jesus to Jerusalem. In fact, most of the gospel tells the story of this journey.

Well what we heard today is the last stop on that journey...the place of a last action, and some final words.

Jesus has said and done some crazy things while he's been on his way. And this isn't the first we've heard about people grumbling over something he's said or done. Lot of people not too happy about what's been going on...healing on the Sabbath; eating with

anyone who will have him over for supper; including in the Kingdom tax-collectors, and prostitutes, and lepers, and Samaritans, and other kinds of people viewed as unclean. He's taught us to pray for the Kingdom; seek the Kingdom; that it's God's pleasure to give the Kingdom; and that the Kingdom of God is within you...you being plural, not singular. He's taught that the way of discipleship is one of generosity with our wealth, mercy towards others, humility around our own selves, and carrying one's cross daily. He's been making all sorts of stops along the way. But when this story ends, he's about to board the train again, and this time the conductor is shouting "Next stop: Jerusalem."

Those around Jesus...those who have been listening to him, maybe traveling with him...they know the next stop is Jerusalem, also. But here's the problem: they think it means one thing. But Jesus knows it means something else. They aren't the first—and they aren't the last—to misunderstand. They think that when he steps into Jerusalem, the whole thing is done; and that the Kingdom arrives immediately; and maybe with a few Roman heads rolling in the streets we can all declare victory, close up shop, and go home.

But they don't have it quite right. It ain't all the way cooked. It's kind of like this...there are some mid-major college basketball programs that make the NCAA tournament and are just happy to be there. They celebrate on selection Sunday, but in their heart of hearts are convinced they're done and there's no more to be accomplished. After all, to be a mid-major and make the tournament is a pretty big thing. There are some programs like that. But there are some places where, when the players get like that, the coach steps in, keeps them focused, asks for their best, and says "this is not the end; there's more work to be done."

So Jesus delivers a last parable...not about a basketball team, but about a nobleman.

There's a nobleman who goes away...to a foreign country...to be given royal power. But there were citizens of that country who didn't want him to be their king, so they sent a delegation to the greater power to express their objection.

Now there's something curious about this parable...This really happened. There was a guy named Archelaus, who was the son of Herod the Great. When Herod the Great died—and that's the Herod in the Christmas story--Archelaus traveled to Rome because he wanted to be made king. That's how the Romans governed Judea at this time...through puppet kings who they appointed. But a delegation of fifty representatives from Jerusalem took it upon themselves to travel to Rome to let Caesar know that they didn't want Archelaus as their king. So there's an element to this parable that those listening would have said "Oh, okay...I get it. I know this story. I know where this one is going." At least at the beginning. The difference is that the Romans listened to the people of Judea, and gave Archelaus authority but did not make him king. When Jesus says "He returned, having received royal power," those listening would have then begun to wonder what's up...

While the man is away, he gives gifts to some of his slaves and tells them to do business with the money until he returns. A pound here is a mina; and a mina is about three month's wages. When he returns, one reports he has used what he's been given to make ten more pounds, and is rewarded. And one reports he has used what he's been given to make five more pounds, and is rewarded. But the last one acted differently. His self-created fear...and it is a self-created fear; the nobleman, you will notice, condemns this man with the words of his own mouth...paralyzes him, so he doesn't do a single thing with that pound. He just put it in a napkin, and laid it on the shelf. 0% interest on that kind of

investment. Remember the song? “Hide it under a bushel?” Well, this fella didn’t hide it under a bushel. He hid it in a napkin. And the result is that the master takes away the pound he has been given, and gives it to the person who will do something with it.

Now, we could spend a lot of time with this parable. There are intricacies here we could dwell on for some time. But I’d prefer to just get straight to the point:

It’s a pretty obvious message. Doesn’t take a whole lot of analysis to see what’s going on here. A bunch of people think that now that he’s just about to Jerusalem, the whole thing is done. So he tells a parable that really says “The work isn’t finished. Now is actually the time to get down to business because there’s work to be completed before the nobleman—who’s going away for a while—returns as King. So I’m giving you what you need to get the job done, and I’ll be back later to see what you’ve done with it.” And we all know...the issue here isn’t how many pounds we’ve been given. Some ten; some five; some one; some twenty; some ¼. The issue is allowing ourselves to be changed; the issue is responding to the generosity, and using what we’ve been given. Because we’ve all been given some pounds.

Easter is coming, everybody. There ain’t no stoppin’ the grace of God. The stone is rolled away. Jesus is resurrected; and we’re resurrected; and the Church is resurrected. There’s new life sprouting all over the place. The love of God is real, and is just an “is;” and the Kingdom may not be coming immediately, but it certainly is coming. All that is true. God just keeps coming, and coming, and coming; and giving, and giving, and giving. And in response, we are renewed and changed. He makes us new; and he makes us different...not just once, but all the time. It’s not like we ever get there. We keep going there and being brought there. We are taken over...not just once, but again and again and again...and we open up; and are given new vision, and new hope, and new healing, and new peace, and new purpose. It’s a miracle; a universe-shattering, every day miracle.

Here’s what it’s like...

It’s like being another tax-collector outcast who wakes up one morning expecting it to be one more day where everyone ignores him because of how he makes his living; and where nasty things are said behind his back and he lives quietly because no one would talk with him anyway. And instead, because he climbs a tree to see a rabbi who probably won’t give him the time of day because he’s a tax-collector and the other guy’s a rabbi, hears “Zacchaeus! Get out of that silly old tree. I’m comin’ to your house tonight.” And in response to that coming, something new happens in Zacchaeus. He opens. His life is changed, and he changes.

Now I invite you to translate that. Instead of Zacchaeus, put in your own name. And instead of “get out of that silly old tree,” insert “get out of that silly old _____;”...and you fill in the blank with whatever it is that keeps you up in the air...and only you know what that is. Because here’s some news...he’s calling us down; he’s comin’ to your house today, and mine, too.

We’re claimed; and sometimes, like here, Jesus doesn’t wait for an invitation to do what he’s going to do. (I think it means something that in this last story before Jerusalem, Jesus initiates, not the host.) We get changed, and when that happens...well, we’re changed. And today, salvation comes to this house!

But the parable that comes next fits in by reminding us that salvation ain’t all the way here yet; the Kingdom is still on its way. So in the mean time...in the middle

time...we've got work to do; it's time to respond. Jesus has given us the resources to get it done; and like a good manager, asks for an accounting.

Grace is free, but it ain't cheap. You've heard us say that before, but we didn't make it up. It's just a truth that the faithful have maintained for ages. This week, we are showing hospitality to some new friends who have no place to live, and if there is greater evidence that the work isn't done, I don't know what is. And you see the incompleteness where you are...in your offices and schools...that it's not exactly the way it should be. So the Lord loves us too much to say "you don't matter," or "there's nothing for you to do" or "just come along for the ride." The message is clear here, and it's not complicated. The word "spectator" is not used once in the New Testament. There is no scriptural command to sit back and watch it all pass by. Instead, we're invited to dive in and bring a return on the King's investment in us. Let Jesus take whatever fears we have, because there's no reason to be afraid.

We've been given our pounds to use them...so that we can soar, and be in the game, and help the kingdoms of this world become a bit more like the Kingdom of God, step by step.

So in our Lenten journey, a final story, and a final word from Jesus before he goes to Jerusalem. Salvation comes to the unlikeliest house, one more time. And a reminder...that the Kingdom's coming, but not quite here. Until it is, we get down to business; do our job; use what we've been given to further God's purposes, and hold one another accountable for how we do so because that's what Jesus does and so we do that for one another. These are the final actions and the final words before the train stops in Jerusalem, and Jesus arrives where he's been going all these days.

Or maybe not...because isn't it true that today, we have one more chance to live what Jesus teaches today?! And then another, and another, and another. Jesus is alive; brings good changes; makes us new; calls us out of our tree. He proves that in us, and today we get to show it one more time...that this particular final teaching really isn't final at all. And today, we again get to use our pounds, and pass it on.