

“Last Words”
Romans 1:8-17; Luke 2:8-14; Deuteronomy 31:1-8

“Do not be afraid.” It is amazing how many times the Bibles tell us not to be afraid. Repeatedly, in all sorts of situations, the Bible says we are not to fear. For instance, the Israelites stand on the verge of entering the Promised Land. Moses, who led them out of Egyptian bondage, delivered the Ten Commandments to them, sustained them for forty years in the wilderness, has died. Young, untested Joshua has now taken over the leadership. The Promised Land is full of strong, warrior tribes who will fight to the death to maintain their territory. And God says to the Israelites, “Do not be afraid.”

On Easter, the women show up at Jesus’ tomb. An earthquake heralds the approach of an angel whose appearance is like lightning. Jesus, their Savior, their Master, is gone. What does that mean to their lives, their hopes and dreams? And the angel says to them, “Do not be afraid.”

The problem with all these stories is that we know there are multiple, very good, reasons to be afraid, very afraid. We live in a political atmosphere where lying, bullying, and name calling are now the norm. Words and actions that if our five year old engaged in them at school, we would spank them and banish them to sit in the corner. Compromise is now a dirty word. We are witnessing the deliberate undermining of the institutions that have undergirded the nation since its founding – the courts, the press, law enforcement, the Church.

So far this year, there have been 154 mass shootings. Gun owners say silly things like “guns don’t kill people, people do.” Non gun owners refuse to acknowledge that a significant number of people in America feel strongly about possessing a gun. In the meantime, our children continue to die. I believe that if we do not face this issue with honesty, asking how to achieve the greater good, the next generation will look on you and me as we now view segregation asking, “What were they thinking?”

We continue to foul and pollute God’s creation.

We continue to elect people who refuse to tackle our nation’s, our state’s, problems.

The social security trust fund will be depleted by 2034.

Medicare will run out of reserves in 2026.

The nation’s deficit continues to soar.

As the middle class shrinks, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. In 1978, the average CEO pay was thirty times their employees. Now it is 271 times their employees.

Across the nation, regardless of affiliation, church attendance continues to decline.

Over the next decade, seventy-five percent of Presbyterian ministers will retire. Fifty percent of Presbyterian seminary graduates leave the ministry within the first five years.

Giving to the Christian Church in America has declined from sixty-six percent of all giving forty years ago to thirty-two percent of all giving today.

Now, I could go on and on with this, as could each of you, but it reminds us that when the Bible says, “Do not be afraid,” we are a little skeptical. Sometimes when I am standing in the waiting sacristy with a groom and best man, listening for the processional music, the groom will confide to me that he is a little nervous, a little scared. And my reply is always the same, “if you are not scared, you don’t understand what is about to happen.”

So, what do you say after thirty-one and one half years that you have not said before? What parting words do you proclaim? I want to tell you four things. The first is “do not be afraid.”

What is easy for us to forget is since the creation of Adam and Eve, there have always been reasons to be afraid. For instance, at Christmas we celebrate the sweet appearance of the angel to the shepherds “keeping watch over their flocks by night.” The angel says to them, “Do not be afraid,” and then announces the wonderful news of Jesus’ birth. We revel in the vision of the angel, the singing of the heavenly host, these incredibly fortunate shepherds. Why should they be afraid?

But in the first century, shepherding was one of life’s most dangerous jobs. Living out in the middle of nowhere, all by yourself. No cover from the elements. Only a slingshot to protect you from ravenous wolves, watching over sheep which constituted the family’s only asset. Plus, you were ruled by Herod. The same king who killed the infants in Bethlehem trying to find Jesus, the same king who killed his wife and three sons to protect his throne. And, you were dominated by the pagan Romans who laughed at your God while taxing you to the hilt.

The Bible’s admonition to not be afraid has always come to God’s people when there were many good reasons to be afraid. So, why does the Bible say over and over “Do not be afraid?”

Because as people of faith we know God is here and God does not abandon His people. God always takes care of God’s Church. That doesn’t mean there will not be difficult times. There will always be things to fear, and with God’s help, we must do our part. In the 1960’s, as this church considered taking a stand against racism and segregation, many feared going against the culture. But deciding not to be afraid, Westminster spoke out for equality for all God’s children.

In all three capital funds drives over the last thirty years, fundraisers told us we should be afraid, that we could not raise the amount of money needed for our projects. Each time, we decided not to be afraid and accomplished our goals.

Purchasing the old Southside Baptist Church property across the street looked like a money pit, requiring a \$100,000 asbestos abatement to just tear down the building. But we had a dream of a retirement center here in the midst of our neighborhood. And you decided to not be afraid.

The Bible over and over again says, “Do not be afraid,” because the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God who raised Jesus from the dead, has been with this church in the past, resides among us right now, and will be here in the future. Do not be afraid!

A mother was driving with her three young children one warm summer evening when a woman in the convertible ahead of them stood up and waved. She was buck naked! As the mother reeled from the shock, she heard her five-year-old shout from the back seat, “Mom, that lady isn’t wearing a seat belt!”

When we are worried only about safety, it is easy to miss the larger picture. We are not afraid because we know God is with us.

Second, “love one another.”

Just like being afraid, there are always reasons to not love one another. Loving one another is not an emotion, but a decision. It is always interesting to me when a new member

would relate that he joined Westminster because we don't have any drama. Over the last decades, we chose to explore divisive issues through education and study. We did so knowing everyone would not agree. But determined to respect each other's opinions and when the church moved in a certain direction to not demean those who disagreed, but to continue to give them a place to stand within the community of faith.

And, just as importantly, we decided we would concentrate on Westminster's historic commitment to missions. However we may diverge on social or theological issues, every single one of us could agree to reaching out to "the least of these," working to enhance the physical, emotional, and spiritual lives of all God's children.

I urge you to continue to "love one another." There will always be issues. They will be painful. Yet, if we are open to God's Spirit, we can work them out. But only if we continue to face them with Christian love and charity.

And, allow me to say a word about Ben Dorr, who tomorrow will become the sixth senior pastor in Westminster's history. Show Ben some love. He will do things differently from me. That will likely make some of you very happy, and maybe a few of you a little sad. But he should do things his way. Support him, cut him a little slack. You and Ben together can and will do great things for the Kingdom of God.

An avid duck hunter was in the market for a new bird dog. His search ended when he found a dog that could actually walk on water to retrieve a duck. Shocked by his find, he was sure none of his friends would ever believe him.

He decided to try and break the news to a friend of his, a negative person by nature, and invited him to hunt with him and his new dog.

As they waited by the shore, a flock of ducks flew by. They fired, and a duck fell. The dog responded and jumped into the water. The dog, however, did not sink but instead walked across the water to retrieve the bird, never getting more than his paws wet.

This continued all day long. Every time a duck fell, the dog walked across the surface of the water to retrieve it. The negative minded friend watched carefully, saw everything, but did not say a single word. On the drive home the hunter asked his friend, "Did you notice anything unusual about my new dog?"

"I sure did," the friend said with a frown, "Your dog can't swim!"

It is always easy, and tempting, to diagnose what is wrong with someone else. When we decide to love another, we recognize where we disagree, but choose to focus on that person's positive characteristics and how together we can build the Kingdom of God.

"Do not be afraid." "Love one another." Third, "give your money."

I know what you are thinking: I can't believe it is Lud's last Sunday and he's talking about money.

Today, Westminster gives more money to Presbyterian missionaries than any church in the United States.

Our \$250,000 was the largest church donation to Montreat in the renovation of Assembly Inn.

Our \$250,000 gift to Princeton Seminary was the largest church donation to the new library, enabling people all over the world through the internet to access the second largest theological library in the world, second only to the Vatican.

We are the largest church supporter of United Ministries here in Greenville.

We are the second largest supporter in the country to the Presbyterian Church's Theological education fund.

Our \$350,000 enabled United Ministries to renovate their education building.

We are the third largest church supporter of Thornwell Home for Children.

The average Presbyterian Church gives less than eight percent of their budget to missions, we give twenty-eight percent, this year over \$764,000.

Money makes things happen. Children eat, old people get medical care, the gospel is preached when you and I give money.

Today, Westminster Presbyterian Church does not owe anyone anything. From an annual audit to a financial secretary to a church treasurer to a finance committee to the Session, the money you give is watched, guarded, and overseen to ensure it is spent in the work of ministry.

But all of that depends on you. Sacrificial giving, tithing, will change your life. I believe one of the reasons we are so strong as a church is that we have committed spending our resources not only on ourselves, but on others.

As people retire and their giving naturally declines, others must step up their giving to fill in for those losses. Be one of those who steps up. Giving your money changes lives. Not just theirs, but also yours.

Two young boys were spending the night at their grandparents' house the week before Christmas. At bedtime, the two boys knelt beside their beds to say their prayers when the youngest one began praying at the top of his lungs: "I PRAY FOR A NEW BICYCLE...I PRAY FOR A NEW X-Box...I PRAY FOR A NEW BASEBALL GLOVE..."

The older brother leaned over and nudged the younger brother and said, "Why are you shouting your prayers? God's isn't deaf."

To which the little brother replied, "I know, but Grandma is!"

God is not deaf. But God depends on you and me to bring the gifts to build His Kingdom. When we respond to God's blessings by giving to God's work, good things happen, for others, and for us.

"Do not be afraid." "Love one another." "Give your money." And last, "do not be ashamed."

In our scripture text from Romans, the Apostle Paul writes: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith..."

Many believe Paul wrote these words to the small Christian church in Rome while he was residing in Corinth. It doesn't matter because wherever he was, he was surrounded by a pagan culture. Temples to various gods stood on every corner. The Roman emperor was considered a god and citizens in every Roman province were expected to worship him. The fledgling Christian churches were small and dominated by the lower classes, people devoid of political, economic or social power. It would have been inconceivable to those living within the Roman Empire, and likely even the Christians themselves, that the Church would become anything more than just another small religious sect among many.

But Paul believe differently, and history has proved him correct. Jesus changes lives. The forgiveness of God through Jesus Christ enables us to forgive ourselves and access the Spirit of God within us. Belief in Jesus, deciding to follow Christ, makes us more loving, more forgiving, more compassionate, more generous.

We are not ashamed of the gospel because it has been the greatest force for good in the history of the world. There will always be those who seek to discredit God's Church, often pointing to the inadequacies of Christians. And they will be correct, we are a fallible, sinful people. Never forget the Church is not a club for saints, but a hospital for sinners. Yet, there is nothing fallible about the gospel of Jesus Christ. Believing in Jesus, obeying his words, we can change ourselves, and we can change the world.

"Do not be ashamed." The Jesus who rose from the dead, who resides within us will continue to work within Westminster Presbyterian Church, and each one of you.

A new teacher was trying to make use of her recent psychology courses. She started her class by saying, "Everyone who thinks you're stupid, stand up!"

After a few seconds, a little boy stood up.

The teacher asked the little boy, "Do you think you're stupid?"

The little boy replied, "No, ma'am, but I hate to see you standing there all by yourself!"

There will be times our commitment to the faith will make it seem like we are standing all by ourselves. But we know we are not stupid, for the very power of God resides within every one of us who proclaims the name, the love, the forgiveness of Jesus Christ.

"Last Words"

"Do not be afraid."

"Love one another."

"Give your money."

"Do not be ashamed."

There are other things I could say, but after thirty-one and one half years, you've probably already heard them. The last thing to say is the most important. Thank you. For your love, your loyalty, your generosity, your faithfulness. It has been the great privilege of my life to serve this congregation. Though Jean and I must now give up our pastoral duties, we will never relinquish the love and affection we hold for each one of you, or the pride we carry in this congregation.

Thank you for all you have done for me and my family. We pray for God's blessing on this congregation and each one of you.

Ludwig L. Weaver, Jr.
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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