

**6 Easter
May 14, 2023**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit. Amen.**

Sermon by Rev. Jerry LiaBraaten

FAMOUS LAST WORDS

ONE QUESTION

Today I have just one question for us to consider. It's about gardening and fortunately, whether you are a true gardener, a wannabe gardener or one who, like myself, is just very thankful for those of you who know what you're doing when it comes to plants and dirt, you can all answer this one: What does it take for a garden to thrive? Got an answer? Now, please hold that thought. In a few moments we'll come back for it.

FAMOUS LAST WORDS

When I first looked at this text I just let my mind wander and see where it took me. It got me thinking about the last words people speak before their death. I wondered if I'd find anything online about this subject so I googled "famous last words." Sure enough, Google came back with approximately 3,390,000,000 hits in .56 seconds.

So, I read through all those. But I was surprised to discover very few famous last words that had something substantial to say. Here's a sampling of what I found.

"It is very beautiful over there."

– Thomas Alva Edison (D: 1931)

"I am about to—or I am going to—die; either expression is used."

– French grammarian Dominique Bouhours (D:1702)

(I call this person a "die-hard grammarian!")

"I must go in, the fog is rising."

– Emily Dickinson (D:1886)

(Isn't this just what you'd expect from a poet?)

"Either that wallpaper goes, or I do."

– Oscar Wilde (D:1900)

(They say the wallpaper's still there.)

“Friends applaud, the comedy is finished.”

– Ludwig van Beethoven (D:1827)

(Beethoven wrote 722 pieces of music: 9 symphonies/35 piano sonatas/16 string quartets. Many of these were composed while Beethoven suffered from partial then total loss of hearing. Still, he died with his sense of humor intact.)

“I should have never switched from Scotch to Martinis.”

– Actor Humphrey Bogart (D:1957)

My personal favorite were Steve Jobs’ (D:2011) last words as related by his sister, Patty, from his bed. He looked at her, then looked at his children and then his life’s partner Laurene for a long time, then looked over their shoulders as said, “Oh, wow. Oh, wow! Oh, wow!”

JESUS’ LAST WORDS

Today’s gospel reading comes from a section of the gospel of John entitled the Farewell Discourse...theological jargon for Jesus’ last words. What Jesus has been foretelling about his upcoming suffering and death is finally sinking in to his disciples. they’re feeling overwhelmed, afraid, anxious, grief-stricken and panicked at the very least. As far as they can see into their future, this story doesn’t end well for them. So what did they need to hear?

LASTING WORDS

Jesus said what needed to be said. He spoke directly to their fears. He promised them they would not be orphaned. They would not be forsaken or left alone. He told them of a coming day, probably Pentecost, when everything would come together for them and they would understand the big picture. He told them not to be surprised when the world that didn’t know him didn’t understand them. And it’s clear, he intended his last words to be lasting words.

Something else became very clear at that point...his end game...the ultimate purpose of his words...indeed all of his life and ministry: He wanted to create the conditions under which they would thrive (just like planting a garden!)...not just conditions to get them through--to survive through all that lay ahead of them. He wanted them to thrive.

After all, he had said to them just a short time earlier, “I came so they may have life and life abundant.” Does that sound like the words of someone who just wants you to survive? Not at all. Those were the words of someone who wanted them...wants us, wants all creation to blossom...to thrive...to flourish.

A LASTING GIFT: THE HOLY SPIRIT

Jesus then backed up his words with a gift...the gift of the Holy Spirit. He said to them,

“I will ask the father and he will give you an Advocate, to be with you forever.” That advocate was--and is--the Holy Spirit. Its compassionate role was “to come alongside” as the Greek puts it, a “helper” to give them comfort, strength, courage and guidance...and much more. It wasn’t just there to reside *with* them, it was given to abide *in* them. To be their mediator between them and God and between them and the world. Using our garden metaphor, you might say the Holy Spirit is God’s fertilizer.

BUTCHART GARDENS

In 1904 Robert and Jennie Butchart bought a piece of property outside of Vancouver, British Columbia. It didn’t look like much but geological engineers had determined that there was a sizable lode of limestone beneath its surface. Indeed there was. They began mining operations and their business prospered. But in 1912, when Jennie looked out across her back yard she saw a huge, gaping hole in the ground. Then she had an idea. She was, after all, a real gardener...one with a grand vision. She wanted to turn the whole hole into a sunken garden. She set to work using a horse-drawn cart to bring good black soil down to the bottom. Her idea spread and grew throughout the generations of her family. In 2004 Butchart Gardens was designated a National Historical Site of Canada and today it continues to thrive...55 acres, over 900 varieties of plants, 26 green houses and 50 full-time gardeners.

A GARDEN’S SECRETS

If you visit the Butchart Gardens--or for that matter, any thriving garden (maybe there’s one in your yard) you will discover some of its secrets. One is this: If a garden is thriving it shows. And its beauty is there for everyone to behold. No garden anywhere holds back its beauty. It freely...unconditionally...offers it to all. What are the implications of this if we think of the church as a garden?

A second secret is this: Variety is one of the key qualities that makes a garden a garden. You or I may grow a lovely bed of tulips or have a few tomato plants alongside the house, but that, by definition, doesn’t make it a garden. No, part of the beauty of a garden is how the sheer diversity of plants makes each individual plant and variety stand out...so each has its own place and purpose. What does this mean for the church?

And a third secret is this: When we see a thriving garden something inside of us naturally wants to know who made all this beauty happen? We want to meet the gardener. We don’t just want to know *about* them, we want to know them. How did they make all this beauty happen? We want to know their story.

JESUS GAVE THEM ONE MORE GIFT

This is why Jesus gave his followers...then and now...one more gift. In today’s text Jesus said, “On that day you will know I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” We wanted them to know that God didn’t just know them. Through the Holy Spirit they could...they would know the Father...the master gardener personally. One thing we know for sure is that Jesus never held back on revealing the beauty

of knowing God and knowing God's love in our lives. He freely, unconditionally, shared that with everyone. Indeed, it was his whole mission.

WHY THE COMMANDMENT TO KEEP THE COMMANDMENTS?

Finally, there is one other statement Jesus made in today's text that we must consider: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." First of all, which commandments was he referring to? The big ten that God gave to Moses up on the mountaintop? No. Just two. Jesus said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, your soul, your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22: 37-38)

Why did he make this requirement? There is the obvious answer, that is, he knew that keeping the commandments, *especially these two commandments*, is a way--the way--of thriving in this life. But there is also a deeper reason for keeping them, that is, keeping these commandments is our way of saying to God, "I'm all in!"

THE HAND STACK

I've been part of a few sports teams in my life and as far as I can remember we always did the "hand stack." That's where one player extends his or her hand out, palm down, and another places one hand on top...and then another and another and so on until everyone on the team has done so, thus creating a stack of hands. Now at one level a hand stack is that last burst of enthusiasm the players make before play begins or resumes. They're all hoping it'll bring them to victory! But at a deeper level it's a statement made by each player on the team...to the team. It's a simple but powerful gesture that says, "I'm all in." (By the way, Ted Lasso's team does it, too, so it's got to be legit.)

CHRISTIAN AROUND THE WORLD

Christians all over the world have a somewhat similar gesture. I'll show you what it is but first, take a good look at your hands. Examine them. Turn them over slowly. Notice each finger. Your thumb. Your hands have worked so hard for you. They have accomplished so much for you. Through the years they have brought you so much joy and satisfaction. With them you have done great things. You have made a difference in the world. Really, they represent all that you are...all you have been, all that you've become, all that you will be...past, present and future.

"I'M ALL IN."

Now turn them palm-side up and place one hand inside the other, as if you are about to receive Holy Communion. There. That's it. That's the gesture I'm talking about. At one level it's our hands just doing what they do all day long...serve us. In this case, they are receiving a wafer or bit of bread dipped in wine. But at a much deeper level it is our hands--representing all that we are--with this simple but powerful gesture, saying to God--and to each other--"I'm all in." And in return, the wafer and wine alongside the words..."the body and blood" of Christ...are God saying to us, "I'm all in, too."

In that moment love meets love. Because that's what love is...all in. And we realize that whether we're referring to a garden or a person or a community of faith...or the world...if we boil everything it takes in order to thrive down to one word, one last word, that word is *love*. Love is what makes your life, my life, all life liveable. Thriveable. Beautiful!

Amen.