

Last Words

Matthew 28:16-20; 2 Corinthians 13:11-13

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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On this Trinity Sunday, I want to begin with a story from last Monday at the jail. But before I do that, I want to spend a bit of time on the matter of “telling stories from the jail.”

People often express appreciation for these stories, whether when I tell them in church contexts or in my writing or even just casual conversation.

They also occasionally ask me the “why?” question. “Why do you do chaplaincy work there on Mondays? Why do you gravitate toward these stories?”

I’ve been thinking about these “why’s.” Here’s where I would start.

I think the stories, the people, and the stark realities of the jail are a kind of extreme microcosm of the human condition.

If there’s one thing that I’ve learned in jail is that the lines that we like to draw between “criminals” and “law-abiding citizens” is not nearly as clean as we like to imagine.

The women and men I encounter each week at the jail are people. People who have done bad things, certainly. Sometimes very bad things. But people all the same.

People who, underneath all the poor choices and tragic circumstances of their lives, have the same hopes and fears and longings as anyone else.

Nearly everyone I’ve met in jail struggles with addictions of some sort. And what is addiction but a way of coping with pain?

The pain of absent or abusive parents, the pain of dysfunctional social structures, the pain of failure and despair, the pain of not knowing how to make better choices, of never having anyone model what a well-lived life might look like.

Most of us are better at hiding our pain than those in jail are. We often have access to social and relational safety nets that they don't. Our addictions come in more socially approved forms.

Nearly everyone I've met in jail struggles with impulse control and anger, at least on some level. They have often burned bridges that they desperately wish they could cross back over. They want to do better, but they keep lashing out.

Those of us on the outside have perhaps learned better skills for keeping our impulses and urges and volatile emotions under wraps or expressing them in less destructive ways, but these things are not foreign to us.

Nearly everyone I've met in jail has wandered down dangerous and destructive paths at least in part as a response to a hunger for love, belonging, and acceptance.

I am regularly struck by how the men and women in jail have childhood trauma operating in the background.

Those who were supposed to protect them, didn't. Those who were supposed to teach and guide them, neglected the task (or didn't know how to do it). Those who were supposed to love, belittled and mistreated. Those who were supposed to provide a bedrock of safety and security provided an environment that was precarious and unreliable at best.

So many of the people I meet in jail found themselves in the wrong beds, with the wrong friends on the wrong streets, making the wrong choices, at least on some level, because they were so desperate to find somewhere where they belonged and where someone at least gave the illusion of caring about them.

And who among us does not long to be loved, to belong, to be accepted?

I guess, in short, I am drawn to the jail because it's where the human condition is laid most starkly bare.

It's a place where the illusions and pretense that most of us hide our darker selves behind is stripped away.

Each week, when sitting around the circle with the guys in jail, I'm struck by how similar we are.

There we sit, sinners each one of us, hungry for love, for forgiveness, for grace, for mercy and longing to live lives that reflect these things better than we've managed so far.

So, with that context ... A short story from last Monday.

We had been talking about Ephesians 1 and about how God has chosen us from before the foundation of the world to be "blameless and holy," about how in love God "destined us for adoption as his children."

At one point I asked how many of the guys in the room had good relationships with their dads. I would say only about three out of fifteen hands went up. Half of them said their dads weren't alive anymore (and they were mostly young men).

I moved in for the punch line. "Well, whatever your relationship with your earthly father is like, I want you to know that God loves each one of you very much."

There were a few awkward smiles. Some shuffling around. A lot of guys suddenly found their feet very interesting. It was strangely quiet.

I wasn't sure how to interpret this. Were they pondering this deeply? Was this the kind of thing they had heard from people like me in places like this forever? Were they bored?

There was an older barrel-chested guy right beside me. Usually, whenever he speaks it's to make a joke of some kind or another. But he was sort of looking off to the side ceiling when he quietly said:

I don't think Jesus thinks much of me.

A lot of heads went up.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

“Well, I dunno, I mean look at where I am. I should know better than this by now.” He gestured around the room, “I’m the oldest guy in the room, I shouldn’t still be ending up here...”

His words trailed off. My heart broke for him. This broken-down man, exhausted by his own mistakes, unable to imagine that Jesus could think much of him.

I’m not always sure to do in moments like this. So, I told the story of the lost son from the gospel of Luke. It’s my favourite of all the stories Jesus told.

I was trying to get this guy—and all the guys—to see that God has a soft spot for lost sons.

They liked the story. But they weren’t sure. *I’ve done way worse than that dude.*

We talked some more. I tried to assure them that God thought very much indeed of all of them. We prayed. The guys went back to the unit.

But the barrel-chested guy’s comment stayed with me.

I should be better at this by now.

I wonder, how many of us feel the same?

I suspect I am not alone in occasionally thinking, “You know, I really should be a little better at this Jesus-following, discipleship thing by now.”

The title of my sermon this morning is “Last Words.” Both our short texts are the last word in their respective books. The last words of the gospel of Matthew. The last words of Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians.

They’re in the lectionary readings for today because it’s Trinity Sunday and they both refer to the Trinity. This is important.

But I was drawn not only to these texts’ subject matter, but their location. As a writer, I know that last words matter.

You want to end memorably, whether it's a letter or an essay or a sermon. You want to end with something that lodges itself in the minds of your readers or hearers. You want your last words to stick.

Jesus' last words in the gospel of Matthew are a command to first disciples. Go! Baptize! Make disciples!

Great, what's a disciple?

Jesus helpfully explains: "teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (Mat. 28:20)

A disciple is someone who does what a teacher or master commands. And if we're going to teach people to be disciples, we should presumably *be* disciples ourselves.

So, what does Jesus command?

Well, in Matthew, there are five general blocks of teaching that scholars believe comprise the kind of "full curriculum" of Jesus' teaching.

But chapters 5-7 are by far the most well-known. The Sermon on the Mount. For most believers in Jesus, this contains the central tenets of Christian discipleship.

The Beatitudes. Blessed are the poor, the meek, the merciful, those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, the peacemakers.

Not just, don't murder, but don't be angry. Not just don't commit adultery, but don't lust. Not an eye for an eye but turn the other cheek.

Don't do your good deeds to be seen. Don't heap up empty words in prayer. Don't store up treasures on earth. Don't worry. Don't judge or you will be judged.

Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you.

Seek first and above all else the kingdom of God.

This is a radically counterintuitive and countercultural way of living. It is a beautiful and transformative way of being human. Jesus' teaching took hold of those early disciples, and it changed the world.

What do you think when you hear a list like that? I don't know about you, but I think two things:

1. Wow, what a vision of being human.
2. Wow, I am a long way from *that*.

There is often a lack of alignment between the life that I aspire to and the life that I actually live. I doubt I am alone in this.

To quote my barrel-chested friend at the jail, *I really should be doing better by now...*

So, what do we do with this gap between what we're called to as disciples of Jesus and our *actual* performance.

Well, the first thing is that we don't just explain it away. We don't say, "Well, what can you do? Nobody's perfect, right?"

Jesus has called us to make disciples. To *be* disciples. He has modeled and taught a way of being truly human that can change and transform our communities, our churches, our relationships, our very selves.

He has taught a way of living in proper relationship with God and with neighbour, with humility, honesty, other-oriented love.

This is what we need. This is what our world needs.

My barrel-chested friend in jail wasn't wrong. He—and we—really *can* and really *should* be doing better by now.

He knew it. I think we all know it. There are better and worse ways to live a human life.

Jesus' teaching is not just some completely unattainable way of living that's meant to highlight our need for his grace.

Mennonites were kind of birthed out of an insistence that Jesus meant what he said and that he meant for us to *do* what he said.

The Christian life is not necessarily going to be a steady arc of moral and spiritual progress—there will be bumps and blips along the way—but we really should be seeking to align our lives ever more closely with Jesus’ teaching and his way.

And yet...

We must never forget Jesus’ words: “I have come not for the healthy but the sick” (Mark 2:17).

As I’ve said before, I don’t think Jesus is saying, “So, you healthy people just stand aside while I deal with those sick sinners over there.” He means all of us.

Jesus is the friend of sinners.

Which is a good thing, because despite our best attempts to obey everything Jesus commanded, sinners we remain and sinners we shall be until the day we die.

The disciples who joined Jesus on the mountain to be commissioned had indeed left everything to follow him.

But anyone who reads the gospels will notice immediately that their performance is rather mixed.

Even here, after all they had seen, even after the miracles, the healings, the death, the resurrection, even now as he is sending them out under his authority to change the world, it says:

When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted.

Some doubted.

I always take comfort in these little interjections into the biblical text. The bible is not an encyclopedia of perfectly manicured saints, but ordinary people who struggle and strain toward the prize.

The same thing is going on behind the scenes in our second reading. Paul’s last words to the church in Corinth are all about peace, love, and grace and the promise of the triune God.

But the church to whom he wrote that letter was full of sin and dysfunction of all kinds (read his two letters if you doubt this!).

Christianity demands that we hold two vital truths together:

1. We are called to a Jesus-shaped life, to obey his teaching, to grow in faith, hope, and love. We are summoned to be perfect, complete, as our Father in heaven is perfect.
2. We are all sinners. Paul, the great missionary of the early church, even after his dramatic conversion, would describe himself as “the *worst* of sinners” (1 Tim. 1:15) We are all sinners held by a love and a grace that is stronger than our sin.

These things are both true.

We are the elder son diligently doing his best for his father.

We are the younger son stumbling home after making a wreck of his life.

We are the good Christian churchgoer striving to cultivate the habits of a morally serious and spiritually vibrant faith.

We are the barrel-chested guy sitting in jail wondering why he’s back here again and why he can’t seem to get his life together.

The gospel speaks to these two poles of human experience and everything in between.

Let’s end with the Trinity on this Trinity Sunday, shall we?

Jesus commands his disciples to go and baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Paul signs off to the Corinthians by referring to “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.”

There is indeed a deeply trinitarian shape to the Christian hope. Our hope ultimately lies not in our performance but in the character of the triune God.

God the Creator, who in love created each one of us, and calls us to reflect his image in the world.

Christ the Redeemer, who suffered and died in our place, who forgives all of us *who really should be doing better than this by now*, who offers mercy to all who cry out for it.

The Holy Spirit, the Sustainer, the Advocate, who guides and sustains, indwells and enlivens us on the path of faith.

The last word always belongs to God. And the last word is that *this* God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is *with* us and *for* us always, to the very end of the age.

Amen.

