

The Park Road Pulpit
Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church
Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

Living an Unburdened Life
2 Samuel 23.1-7; John 19.28-30
Russ Dean, November 22, 2009



Introduction to Scripture:

Today is the last Sunday of the Christian year. It is not inappropriate, then, though it may at first seem out of place, to read two passages of endings: the final words of Jesus; the final words of David. As we celebrate our Senior Adults this day, I'm not trying to offer any subtle suggestions! This is not a kind of collective eulogy for all in the room who are in those "golden years." We hope you all have many more golden years before we'll have to say grace over you! But the end of the liturgical year and a time to recognize those who have gone before us, who are still going before us, who have already paved the way for the inheritance the rest of us are enjoying – makes today an appropriate time to talk about last things. Lasting things. (Maybe it's a very good time to have this conversation, right here on the edge of the season of Merry Consumption. For few vendors will be trying to sell you gifts within the next month that have lasting value. They're just trying to help you find something, anything, to put on your list for that person who already has everything they need. And then some.) Lasting things. What are they?

It's never too early to begin thinking about what will last when we are gone from the scene. As Stephen Covey writes in his *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, we need to "begin with the end in mind." What will people say about you when you are gone. Young people? What will they say? Parents, professionals, singles, grandparents, seniors... what will they say? And what will you leave? Are you walking this life "bent over," as Charles Frazier so poignantly puts it "bearing the burden of [a life] lived beyond recollection"? Or can you walk tall and proud and free from anyone's burden, because the life you live is your bequest to this world, the faith you trust is your hope for the next?

So even as you are very much alive today, let me invite you to consider your life... What will be your final word?

After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished...

SERMON:

It's not my intent to use this pulpit I have inherited as a venue for the frequent giving of advice to a captive audience. But I feel pretty confident about this piece of it. If you don't have one. Run. Don't walk. Run, to your attorney's office. If you need one, you're sitting within a stone's throw. So, run to the closest attorney you can find, and write your will! Tell them I sent you. And don't leave a stone of your estate unturned.

I don't know anything sadder than the dissolution of a close family, the distancing of those bonds of kinship, the severing of brotherhood and sisterhood that too often come in settling a parent's unfortunately unsettled estate. The 18th century Swiss Theologian Johann Kaspar Lavater spoke as if he were one who knew it all too well when he said, "Never say you know a man until you have divided an inheritance with him." Families otherwise untouched by controversy or conflict too often end up pouring insult on injury when, in the midst of grieving being left alone in the world, find tensions of greed and discontent adding to their pain and suffering. Save them the trouble, parents. It matters not how little you may have. Sometimes the sentimental treasures, the pictures, the tea pitcher in the every day china, daddy's pocket watch that no longer works... are more important than the valuable assets. Do it today. Your kids will thank you for it tomorrow.

(While I'm at it, let me recommend that you stop by the church office sometime soon and pick up a funeral form. Save your loved ones this burden as well. Let them know where to bury you and what you're to wear. Who'll be your pall bearers and where you'd like your memorials left. What to sing and what scripture you most treasure. And hardly anyone here is too young to heed this recommendation – for the more surprising your death, the more numb will be those left behind, and the less capable of making decisions in the difficult hours in which funerals have to be planned.)

Do it today. Your heirs will thank you. But the financial inheritance you will leave, the distribution of your stuff, should be the least of your worries, because after some short amount of time, the stuff will be absorbed into its new life, the money will be spent, and all that will be left to carry on for you is the life you lived. The life you will continue to live in a world that will carry on for you. What else are you leaving this world?¹

Lord Byron once put it, humorously, this way:

The way to be immortal (I mean not to die at all) is to have me for your heir. I recommend you to put me in your will and you will see that (as long as I live at least) you will never even catch cold.

Today we give these moments to the celebration of those senior adults among us who have already written us into their wills. How wonderful and generous it is to give an inheritance before you die – so you can see it enjoyed and benefiting your heirs! We are celebrating those who have given of their lives and their livelihoods. And because of it, they will never die. It is guaranteed!

We are, in this country, who we are, because of your legacy of hard work and hope in difficult times. We are, in this city, who we are, because of the shape you have given to a town that is now a thriving metropolis. We are, in this community of faith, who we are because from the very beginning you refused to be burdened by the stifling traditions of culture and religion. From the beginning, you claimed a truly Baptist heritage of independent mind and spirit and you welcomed the divorced and the disrespected. You created a home for children with disabilities and you were the first in this city to welcome African American children into your daycare. You stood for truth and justice, and in so doing you created a church that is free and faithful. This Baptist pulpit which is now the very open home to a female pastor and her husband is a symbol of that foresight and courage.

¹ Preaching is an interesting exercise, mainly because it is never what you say that is important – it is what they hear that matters! This sermon is not about the purely mundane issue of “writing a will.” The objective is not administrative (i.e., getting people to think about putting the church into their estate planning). Perhaps the introduction will cause people to think about that very practice matter, and that will be good, but several comments following worship made me wonder if I lost people in the introduction. “Writing a will” and thinking of your “bequests” and our “inheritance” are all just tools in the metaphor of thinking about “what you will leave” – which has almost nothing to do with money. Your greatest bequest is your life. What will you leave?

We, who are your benefactors, are grateful.

Today we celebrate the vision of Ola and John Patterson, whose bequest has provided a college education for dozens of students. We celebrate the compassion of Ben Knott, whose “Ruth Fund,” in memory of a deceased daughter, has given financial hope to single parents in this church, and to many, otherwise in our care. Ben, who was still officially a member of this congregation, but who had lived in South Carolina for many years, will be buried this week. His touch will be felt for generations to come. We celebrate the memory of Nelson Eggleston who cared about mundane things. Buildings. Grounds. Because he believed space could be sacred – so it should be cared for. We celebrate the bequest of a patch of ground from the Ashcraft Farm, and for all the harvest that has been gleaned here ever since. And we celebrate the Ashcraft family, whose endowment gift continues to make a difference in the life of this church by providing for important, non-budgeted programs. We celebrate the life of Mack Cameron, whose joy in living continues to bring a smile to our faces, just in calling her vibrant 90+-year-old life to our mind, and through the Good Samaritan fund which now bears her name and continues to provide a sometimes needed hand-up to members of this congregation. We celebrate the dedication of Parks and Eleanor Helms, very much alive and well in this place, whose named endowment speaks of years of friendship, and which will outlast them as we continue to reach into this community in their name.

Patterson, Knott, Eggleston, Ashcraft, Cameron, Helms... and the list goes on and on – and no less is the contribution of so many more who have given so much, countless hours and shared wisdom, so many who are among us, still, adding depth to every conversation, experience to every decision, richness to this community. We are grateful for you. For what you have “bequeathed” to us. For what will remain.

The story of David, the greatest name in all of Israel, is one which should give each of us strength. David, the boy shepherd, who became king of all the land... David, the quiet musician, who quieted the giant of his nation’s fears... David, the adulterer... David, the murderer, who was called the man “*after God’s own heart...*” (1 Samuel 13.14). Yes, this very David should give us strength. For if God can use a boy to do a man’s job. If even David had the heart of God. Then there is hope for you and

me. His legacy stands for life lived in a hardscrabble real world. Where good and bad are mingled. Where “saint and sinner” are one and the same. Where forgiveness and hope for a new day reign. His legacy stands for sober wisdom and seasoned leadership. And his final word, “*He that rules... must be just. Must rule in the fear of God,*” is a word of hope that justice will at last have the final say. That God, and God’s truth, alone will stand. For 3,000 years this word has been spoken. And David’s voice will not soon be quieted. What a legacy.

In the high school Amy and I attended, there was a tradition which surrounded the publication of the springtime yearbook. High School seniors were granted the privilege of bequeathing their status and legacy to the classes that followed. With great fanfare they would write, in all the flowered language high school seniors could muster, of what they would leave to the coming generation of seniors. You could bequeath your first chair in the clarinet section... your spot as the coach’s favorite bench-warmer... your record for tardy-slips granted by the office... your reputation as the “mouth of the south,” and all the trouble it afforded... The bequests were mostly humorous, though a few seniors actually ventured into philosophical ground, or to offer a word of true generosity. Regardless, there was a certain power in that privilege. “I, Russ Dean, of absent mind and bow-legged body, do hereby bequeath the following... dot... dot... dot...”

The word bequeath comes from the Germanic root for “to speak,” because in early English times, wills were literally spoken, dictated by the testator to someone who could write.² It is appropriate, then, that we remember David by his final “word.” It is the “will” he leaves to the earth. And Jesus’ final word? *It is finished?* Over? Done? No. “It is complete.” Like a masterpiece at the hand of a fine painter. Voila – There... it is finished!

² See *The Roots of English: A reader’s handbook of word origins*, by Robert Claiborne, p.120.

Jesus lived his life to the full. “Sucking the marrow” out of each moment.³ Leaving a legacy with each word, each deed, even with a death that many regarded as failure. So full did he live, that even death could not end his life. So richly did he embody the Spirit of God among the people that when he came to breathe his last breath, all there was to say was, “There. Nothing is left. I have spent it all.” Ironically, with nothing left to give – we became the beneficiaries of his greatest gift. It was a life lived, for us. The word is, “complete.”

What word will you leave? What bequests are you already leaving? It is never too late. If you haven't written a will – do it today. If you have spoken one (with your life) – begin today. Free yourself of that burden of living beyond recognition.⁴ Live. Love. Learn. Leave a legacy.⁵ It is never too late. For the final word – your good word of benediction⁶ – is the one that lasts.

May it be so!

³ I was thinking of the words of Henry David Thoreau: “I went into the woods because I wanted to live deliberately. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life...to put to rout all that was not life; and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.”

⁴ These words, from Charles Frazier's, *Cold Mountain*, were featured in today's bulletin: “For several days Inman walked tied at the wrists to the end of a long rope with fifteen other men... Like the vast bulk of people, the captives would pass from the earth without hardly making any mark more lasting than plowing a furrow. You could bury them and knife their names onto an oak plank and stand it up in the dirt, and not one thing – not their acts of meanness or kindness or cowardice or courage, not their fears or hopes, not the features of their faces – would be remembered even as long as it would take the gouged characters in the plank to weather away. They walked therefore bent, as if bearing the burden of lives lived beyond recollection.”

⁵ These words, from Steven Covey, were also used as a written meditation in the bulletin: “There are certain things that are fundamental to human fulfillment. The essence of these needs is captured in the phrase 'to live, to love, to learn, to leave a legacy'. The need to live is our physical need for such things as food, clothing, shelter, economical well-being, health. The need to love is our social need to relate to other people, to belong, to love and to be loved. The need to learn is our mental need to develop and to grow. And the need to leave a legacy is our spiritual need to have a sense of meaning, purpose, personal congruence, and contribution.”

⁶ We sometimes say before pronouncing the benediction, “A benediction is not a prayer, properly speaking, so much as it is a “good word,” spoken as we go, until we meet again, so hear this good word of benediction as you go...”