

“Last Minute Instructions”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Father’s Day, Season of Pentecost, Sunday, June 15, 2014

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Holy Scriptures: 2 Corinthians 13: 11-13

Final Greetings and Benediction

¹¹ Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell.

Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. ¹² Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you.

¹³ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

Sermon

A while back there was a commercial on television

that showed a real village in Russia

where the citizens lived to be 100, 110, 120 years old.

The ad showed them eating their favorite food – yogurt –

and gave American viewers (and consumers)

the impression that if you eat yogurt you, too, can live to be 118 or 119.

After a few weeks of being deluged with these TV ads,

a cartoon appeared in the New Yorker.

The cartoon showed a Russian on his deathbed,

surrounded by his family and villagers,

each one straining to hear his last words of wisdom, which were:

“To...hell...with...yogurt!”

Last minute instructions.

You know the routine.

You are walking out the door for a night on the town,

and you offer final instructions to your baby sitter.

Next door neighbors' names, don't eat the casserole for the church dinner,

poison control number is by the phone.

A beloved soul is going away,

so you send her off with sage advice that took you years to learn.

When our children are leaving the home whether for a night out or off to

college,

I always say, *“Remember who you are and whose you are.”*

You get the picture.

When the Apostle Paul concluded his epistle to the church in Corinth,

he dropped some pearls of wisdom gleaned from years

in pulpits and pews, in tent making and church planting.

Maybe he knew that first impressions and last words

are what really stick in our memory banks.

In any case, these few, final words had weight.

Paul said, *“Put things in order, listen to my appeal,*

agree with one another, live in peace;

and the God of love and peace

will be with you.” (2 Cor. 13: 11b)

This is sound counsel for today’s church.

Put things in order.

Prioritize.

Decide what and who is important,

and you will soon see that

things and work and relationships tend to
fall into place.

Listen to my appeal.

Listen to your elders.

Attend to the Word.

Pay attention to the teachings of Christ,

to the Psalmists, and the prophets, and
your elders.

Invest yourself in God's Word and God's wisdom
bearers.

Remember that where your money is,

where your investment is, there will
be your heart also.

Agree with one another and live in peace.

Restore harmony.

Do this in remembrance of Jesus Christ, and God will be with
you.

The Apostle Paul addressed friends and neighbors

who seemed to be having a difficult time working together

as well as keeping their focus on Christ rather than
themselves.

Paul encouraged them to modify their behavior,

saying, *"Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one
another,*

live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.”

The transforming love of God has the power to help modify our behavior as well.

Now is as good a time as any for us to listen to Paul’s counsel.

Our first step toward harmony

is to apologize with an honest and humble heart.

How many times have you heard someone else say “I am sorry”

and you knew by the persons voice and body language it was false,
that she or he didn’t really mean it!

And how many times have we done the same?

Confession of sin is good for the soul and good for harmonious living.

Say and mean that you are deeply sorry when you have erred and sinned,
and will do everything possible to modify and correct behavior.

Be grateful that “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,

the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit”

is with all of us now and forever. (2 Cor. 13: 13)

Live in awe of the forgiving grace of God.

These were Paul’s last minute instructions.

He offered to the church and the world a fond farewell and parting thought or two.

Paul is not alone in offering last minute, final instructions and wisdom.

Moses, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Amos, Jesus Christ and countless saints
before us

made sure their final breaths carried the weight and wisdom
gleaned from experience and faith.

I can add to this litany my own ancestors and friends and church members
who have passed on their last words of hope and direction.

You can, too.

We choose to listen to, to respect, to heed and follow their last minute
instructions

because we also respect the totality and cumulative effect of their
lives.

They were not perfect, yet certainly faithful.

They were not always right, yet more often than not they were righteous.

We see their lives in light of the moral arc of the universe,

and we see that their lives bend toward justice,

toward love, toward enhancing and impacting the
common good.

We who are the survivors,

we who are the listeners of the last words,

we who are the carriers of the wisdom that has been
passed on,

we are the ones God has touched and gifted

with the responsibility of being the bearers of the Word.

Be careful, my friends.

Do not give weight or too much credence to last minute instructions

from persons who are overtly negative, or mean spirited,

or selfish, or possibly deranged or deluded or demented.

Think long and ponder well whether to heed last minute instructions

that tell you to never marry again,

or to carry on a tradition or expectation which is unrealistic,

or to stay in the same home or town forever,

or to hold a grudge, and on and on the sad litany goes.

Be careful not to allow the anger or grief, sadness or sickness

of the dearly departed to live on in you.

Release that final word and give it to God and then let it be.

A common last minute instruction is to not have a funeral.

Far too often have families said to me,

“So and so said for us not to have a service, so we’re not.”

Hmmm.

Some last minute instructions simply need to be ignored.

Funerals are not for the deceased; they are for the living.

A home-going service is a sacred time and place and experience

for healing and connecting with the grace of God and one another.

How we bury and remember our dead

speaks volumes about how we live.

What we choose to heed and pass on

is a living testament about our priorities.

May the cumulative effect and impact of our lives give weight to our last words,

and may our last words be lasting in the light of love.

They say that a local newspaper ran an obituary for a gentleman

Who, first thing in the morning,

promptly walked into the newspaper editor's office to lodge a complaint.

"How dare you print my obituary in your paper!" he shouted.

"I am alive. See, here I am!"

The editor admitted her error, saying, *"Yes, I see that you are alive and kicking."*

"I'm sorry to say that there is nothing to be done about yesterday's news.

The best we can do is to list you tomorrow in the Birth Column

and give you a fresh start."

We invest much energy on endings and last, final moments of life,
yet the Good News of Jesus Christ is one of fresh starts, new birth,
that earthly endings become spiritual beginnings.

Just as the song by Semisonic states,

*“Every new beginning comes from some other beginnings
end.”*

Where the world sees finality,

Christians testify to fresh starts and new hope.

Margaret Gilkey Richards shares this memory of her father, James Gordon Gilkey.

While living in Portland, Oregon,

James Gilkey was informed by his physician that he had an incurable disease.

Death could not be averted, nor long delayed.

Here is his final earthly story,

including some of his own last words

spoken to God’s creation that he loved:

“I walked out to my home five miles from the center of the city.

There I looked at the river and the mountain which I love,

and then, as the twilight deepened – at the stars glimmering in the sky.

Then I said to them,

‘I may not see you many times more.

But River, I shall be alive

when you have ceased running down to the sea.

Mountain, I shall be alive

when you have sunk down into the plain.

Stars, I shall be alive

when you have fallen in the ultimate disintegration of the universe.”

These words speak of a final farewell, when in actuality they testify to a fresh start:

¹¹ *Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell.*

Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace;

and the God of love and peace will be with you.

¹² *Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you.*

¹³ *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God,*

and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

Benediction

“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,

the love of God,

and the communion of the Holy Spirit

be with all of you.” (2 Cor. 13: 13) Amen!

Extra Material

When I was 21 years old I gave my dad, George Calvert, a Father’s Day card that had a quote attributed to Mark Twain: *“When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years.”*

Just after Father’s Day in 2005, my dad sat down at his computer and typed out his last letter to his progeny. He would pass away three weeks later, at home, surrounded by his beloved. Here is an abbreviated excerpt of his farewell note to his grandchildren. In the letter he mentions a note from Elizabeth, who is his 5th grandchild out of 9.

Andes, June, 2005

To my wonderful grandchildren:

One of the lovely items Elizabeth's letter mentioned was that she was only 17, and that she wished we would double that time of companionship and family fellowship instead of its real potentiality of ending this year.

I share her wish, but my physical well-being seems to be decreasing, while the cancer seems to be impacting ever larger.

... I have had an exhilarating life getting to know you, my grandchildren. The first part is 53 years of marriage with Buffy; then our children, your fathers; then the 4 wonderful daughters they drew into our family..

The call to East Harlem, the Church of the Living Hope, great times at Perch Lake, campfires, songs in the car rides, ball games, Hope Community, visits to your lovely homes, Camp Calverts, you name it –

Our years have been short but intense.

I cherish every minute of our times together.

Jesus quoted it the best: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind, And your neighbor as yourself."

That ain't easy -- and that's why I advocate for close, regular fellowship with others trying to do the same thing (aka, the Church, with all its imperfections).

Our forbears did it.

I hope you will each find your way to respond to God's call, to you and YOUR families.

As I write this, the Brewer-Calverts are heading across NY State toward Andes;

Peter, Suzanne and Jasmine are touring in Greece;

the Jonathans are retreating from the Poconos to Brooklyn;

and the David CKs are packing up and moving

to another apartment in Colonia Polanco Mexico City.

My Grandfather [William Samuel] Calvert is surely nodding in approval!

And so do I.

I love you.

Grnpa George