

July 16, 2023

Farewell

Jeff Marian

To get ready for this sermon I've been thinking a lot about final words these past few weeks. Final words matter. They deserve serious consideration. So, I went in search of some wisdom and inspiration. I Googled "final words". What I found were the last words of some famous people before they died. Not exactly what I was looking for, but it certainly was interesting.

Emily Dickinson's final words were, "I must go in. The fog is rising." Isn't that awesome?

Thomas Edison's final words were, "It is very beautiful over there." Doesn't it make you wonder what he saw?

My personal favorite is Oscar Wilde's final words. He said, "Either that wallpaper goes, or I do." Apparently, the wallpaper won.

The first congregation I served was in Loves Park, IL, a suburb of Rockford. Just down the street was a small, conservative church that had been served by the same pastor for 40 years, and that pastor was now retiring. Every week that church put the upcoming Sunday's sermon title on their street sign, and I was curious as to what this pastor would entitle his final sermon. I was not disappointed. He entitled it, "If You All Go to Hell, It Isn't My Fault". Seriously! You just can't make this stuff up.

Well, for my final words, I want to share three themes, a word about change, and a word of thanks. Let's start with three themes.

Remember when you were in school and your teacher was doing a review to help you get ready for a test and she'd say something like "If you remember nothing else, remember these three things"? Well, there's no test, but as I've reflected on it, these are three themes I hope have stuck here, three connected themes I've tried to consistently communicate in the last fifteen years.

Here's the first one: Faith is more about "here and now" and less about "there and then". In other words, the Christian faith is more about how we live today than whether we go to heaven tomorrow. It's not an either/or. I'm not suggesting that death is the end of life. But for far too long Christianity has been "sold" mainly as a ticket to heaven when you die. However, we here at Prince of Peace have spent enough time in the Gospels in worship, the Engage Bible Study and small groups to know that Jesus had little say about what happens after we die, and much to say about how we live today. Jesus made it about "here and now" more than about "there and then".

He talked about loving our enemies. Living generously. Forgiving freely. Serving selflessly. Worshiping wholeheartedly. From Jesus' perspective, faith is about how we live in the here and now. I take great joy in proclaiming the hope of resurrection at a funeral, and I live in the hope of my own resurrection one day. But faith has far more to do with living than dying according to Jesus.

And that leads me to the second connected theme: love is the central call of the Gospel. When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was, in other words, what matters most in life, he replied, "Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, mind, soul and strength, and love your neighbor as you love yourself." And I have come to believe that the primary way that we love the God we cannot see is by loving the neighbor we can see. And we do that well here at Prince of Peace. We do it through things like Love Your Neighbor, Lay Ministry, Prayer Ministry, Mission Outpost and Mission Outreach, Feed My Starving Children, Creation Care, POP for Justice, Diaper Ministry, Quilt Ministry, Caregiver Support, Grief Group, Parkinson's Support, AA, all our ministry to Children and Families from CDLC on...and all of our remarkable music ministry from choir, to brass to bells and worship teams. And that just scratches the surface. We love because God first loved us, and this congregation puts flesh on that love by being the hands, feet, and heart of Jesus for one another within this community of faith and for the world around us. I love that about Prince of Peace.

And that takes us to the third theme: God's love...and therefore our love... is for all, and all means all. When Jesus was asked "who is my neighbor" he responded with the story of the Good Samaritan, and in that story, he defined our neighbor as anyone in need. No qualifications. No stipulations. When Jesus had a conversation with a religious leader named Nicodemus to explain who God is and how God works, he famously said, "For God so loved the world." Not just the rich people or the religious people, or the white people or the good people or the straight people. God's love is for the whole world, for all people, and all means all.

There are many things that make me proud to have been affiliated with Prince of Peace these past 15 years, but nothing makes me prouder than the wide, inclusive welcome of this congregation to all people, because it is a living reflection of the heart of God for the world.

Three interconnected themes – faith is about entrusting ourselves to the love and grace of God today, in a way that sends us out to love our neighbor...all of our neighbors. Those within our walls and those outside of them. When love wins, God wins and the Kingdom of

God is revealed for the world to see. Keep shining that light Prince of Peace.

Now a word about change. We've changed a lot in the past 15 years. It hasn't been easy, but we are stronger, healthier, and better positioned to meet the challenges ahead. Your new lead pastor is not going to fill my shoes. I know that because I've seen him in flip-flops and his feet are bigger than mine! Things are going to change more, and they need to. The future of Prince of Peace depends upon it. I don't say that lightly, but I mean it seriously.

I know that change is hard. We value stability and certainty in an unstable and uncertain world. But our certainty and stability are anchored in God's unchanging presence, love, and grace in our lives, not in the shape of the institution known as the church. While God doesn't change, the church must be continually re-formed by the Spirit. That's what Reformation is all about! So, for the sake of the Gospel, extend Pastor Paul Dean the same grace and patience you afforded me as you navigate the road ahead.

And finally, a word of thanks. You took a chance on me 15 years ago, and I'm grateful for the opportunity to have served with you. Never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined that I would serve as lead pastor here. Prince of Peace isn't the only thing that's changed in these 15 years. I've changed too. I'm not the same person or pastor that I was when I came in 2008. I'm cheering for the Golden Gophers instead of the Ohio State Buckeyes now. And as much as I hate to admit it, I've caught a bit of the Purple Fever. I'm a little heavier and a little grayer, but hopefully a bit wiser and definitely more comfortable in my own skin. When I moved here, I didn't own a bike but now I pedal every chance I get. I came here a beer snob and I'm leaving a Bourbon aficionado. Most importantly my faith feels more genuine and more deeply woven into my soul than it ever has.

In other words, for the past 15 years you've given permission to be myself and to become more and more of the person God created me to be. You gave me space to try new things, permission to fail, and the grace of forgiveness when I did fail. And you've done it all with the kind of abundant love that every human heart needs. The kind of love that is a living reflection of the love of God that has been revealed in Jesus Christ. I am so very grateful. I may be leaving this role of lead pastor, but I will forever carry this faith community in my heart.

Let's pray...

God of the Church, as we reflect on the past 15 years, we give you thanks that you have always been both our destination and the road we have traveled. Your love has been the common thread that has been woven through our story. Your Spirit has been the wind at our back, nudging us forward when we have been hesitant to sail into the unknown. It is faith that opens our eyes to see you in the rearview mirror, and it is hope that compels us down a path that divides today but will surely become one again in the future. That is our hope, and you are our living hope. All this we pray in the strong name of Christ and together all God's people said, Amen.