



# Westminster Presbyterian Church

Richard Baker - March 26, 2017 Sermon

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## The Last Discourse: Not As the World Gives

John 15:1-6, 8-17

*The Last Discourse is Jesus' last testament: it is meant to be read after he has left the earth. Yet it is not like other last testaments, which are the recorded words of those who are dead and can speak no more. It is a living discourse delivered to all readers of the Gospel, not by a dead man, but by the one who has life.—Raymond E. Brown, The Anchor Bible, The Gospel According to John, Introduction, Translation and Notes.*

Jesus' *Last Discourse*, or his *Farewell Discourse* is called that for an obvious reason: he's saying good-bye to his disciples. It begins immediately after Judas runs out into the night from the room where they have been having their last supper together, and it goes on for more than four chapters (the end of Chapter 13 and all of chapters 14, 15, 16, and 17), with Jesus speaking almost the whole time, only occasionally interrupted by questions from the disciples—questions expressing their confusion, their bewilderment, and their fear. It ends only when Jesus and the disciples also quit the room to walk to the Mount of Olives, where they often went, and where, that same night, Judas will lead soldiers to arrest Jesus.

It's called the Last Discourse, or the Farewell Discourse, because Jesus is saying goodbye to his disciples, but, really (as Raymond Brown says), Jesus is speaking to us. To hear it, however, we need to put ourselves in the shoes of the disciples.

The disciples called Jesus "teacher," and we have to remember what that word, "teacher", meant to them. For the disciples, in their world, a teacher was not just someone you had for just one subject, just one semester, just three hours a week, just three credits, A, B, C, D, or F, whom maybe you liked, or—perhaps depending on where you fell on that A to F scale—maybe you didn't, but in either case was in and out of your life in relatively short order—which in some cases was a blessing. No, for the disciples, in their world, a teacher called you to a new way of life, a teacher became your life. You dropped everything—your job, your family, and your old way of life—to follow the teacher to a new one. The teacher gives you a new identity. You become one of the teacher's followers with the assumption being that that would be your identity for the rest of your life. To leave the teacher was to repudiate the teacher as a teacher. It was to say that what you had thought was the new way of life was not a new way of life at all, but an illusion.

At one point, it's early in John's Gospel, immediately after Jesus has delivered one of his so-called "hard sayings," we're told this:

*"Because [he said] this [hard saying], many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. So Jesus asked the twelve, 'Do you also wish to go away?' Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.'"*

Here, as elsewhere, Peter is the spokesman, the representative figure for the twelve apostles. And in his words—"You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe you are the Holy One of God."—we can hear just how great their faith in Jesus was .

But now that faith is being put to a far greater test. Because now Jesus, their teacher, tells them that his hour has come: he is leaving them; hence the Last Discourse—he's saying goodbye.

It's the hour they've been dreading. Jesus knows this, he can see it in their faces; he can read it in their hearts. So he says to them:

*"But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?' But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts."*

Sorrow *has* filled their hearts. And it's not hard to put ourselves in their shoes—to feel their sorrow and to understand their stunned reticence. We all know it's like—when your heart begins to break, when your world begins to fall apart.

You're saying goodbye to the one person who matters most to you—whose voice matters most to you—and you find yourself wondering, with reason, whether this will be the last time you'll ever hear that voice. OR: The phone wakes you up at 1:00 am and you don't know what you're going to hear but you know it can't be good. OR: The doors into the waiting area swing open, the doctor, spots you, then looks down, then begins to walk slowly towards you; before the doctor reaches you, before the doctor even says a word—you know. "Oh, dear God."

We all know what it's like, when the worst thing happens, the thing you have dreaded above all else, the thing you always knew might happen, could happen—maybe would happen—but couldn't bring yourself to think about happening. And when it does happen, you just can't take it all in. It's like being dropped on a sudden into a deep whirlpool: you can't swim to the top, you can't touch bottom, you're just being pulled down, down, down: everything, all the words you hear—all the words you say—seem strange and and slow and muffled, as if coming from farther and farther away. And more than anything else you just want to run away: pretend it can't be happening, pretend it isn't happening, hang up the phone, run out the door and go hide in your car in the hospital parking lot.

And soon enough the disciples will run away into the darkness, too. And here again Peter, is their representative figure.

When Peter swears that he will follow Jesus anywhere, that he will even lay down his life for him. Jesus says to him, "**Will** you lay down your life for me, Peter? Very truly, I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times." And of course it proves true. But it's not just Peter; they will all run away. Jesus says to them:

*"The hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you all will be scattered, each one on his own, and you will leave me by myself."*

Their faith in him is being put to a far greater test—and all of them will fail.

It's not hard to put ourselves in the disciples' shoes here, either. We all know what it feels like to fail—to fail to live up to our best, professed aspirations. And most of us know what it feels like to

fail a friend or someone we love and admire. And at times some of us have known what it feels like for that failure to be the final interaction, the last thing between us and that friend, that person we love and admire. We all know what it feels like to have run away into the darkness. If the worst thing that could happen, when it does happen, feels like being thrown on a sudden into a deep whirlpool, then living with this kind of failure feels like the settled sadness of self-disappointment, a flat world without color, depth, or beauty, or rather, a world whose beauty fills you not with joy, but with a sense of loss.

So it's not hard to put ourselves in the shoes of the disciples in order to hear Jesus speaking to us in The Last Discourse. So when we do, what do we hear? Well, listen; I can't read the whole Last Discourse, but I'll read some representative sentences, and I hope I can say them in a way so that you can hear Jesus speaking to the disciples, to you, and to us:

*Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. I am going away, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.*

*Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. If you ask me for anything in my name, I will do it.*

*I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.*

*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives.*

*I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.*

*I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. When the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth.*

*So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.*

Jesus does not give as the world gives—truer words were never spoken. Where we might have expected Jesus to say words of regret to the disciples—*this has turned out badly*—Where we might have expected him to say words of resignation to them—*but there's nothing we can do about it*—where we might have expected him to say words of reproach—*one of you has betrayed me and all of you have will forsake me*—where we might have expected those kind of words (and certainly they're the kind of words the world would give, but Jesus does not give as the world gives), Jesus instead says:

**Words of life and joy:** Because I live you also will live, I have said these things so that your joy might be complete

**Words of comfort and hope:** Do not let your hearts be troubled. I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you; I will see you again.

**Words promising strength:** You will do greater works than I have done. If you ask anything in my name, I will do it.

**Words promising truth:** I will send the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit will guide you into all truth.

**Words of peace:** My peace I give to you, I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace.

**Words of love:** No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if love one another as I have loved you.

How can Jesus say these things? Given the awfulness of the events beginning to unfold that night—all that has already happened and all that is about to happen—*how can* he say these things?

He can say them because they are true. And they are true because he is what he says he is: He is the true vine; He is the one who brings life to the world. It is because he is the life of the world that he can promise life and joy, comfort and hope, strength and truth, peace and love—even in the face of death, even beyond death. Of course, when he says these words to the disciples, they are still seeing him face-to-face. But soon, very soon, they will no longer see him face-to-face; hence he says to them, "I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer." With the Last Discourse, he is preparing them for that time.

It is as if he is *already* speaking to them from heaven: he is telling them the things that will happen later, the things they must remember, the things they must believe, how they must live, *once he has ascended to heaven*.

It is as Raymond Brown said—

*Although Jesus speaks at the the Last Supper, he is really speaking from heaven.*

And that's true for both the disciples and for us. So how do they, how do we stay, with Jesus even when Jesus seems to be absent?

By faith.

So when Jesus says, "Stay with me, as I stay with you," he's saying, "Have faith, and you will be with me and I will be with you."

And if we, with the disciples, say, "But we have failed you in our faith," Jesus has only one thing to say to us: "I am the vine and you are the branches: I give you life; I give you faith. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Stay with me, as I stay with you. I will send you the Spirit, and the Spirit will guide you into all truth. Bear fruit. You are my friends. Love one another as I have loved you. Bear fruit, fruit that will last. Stay in my love."

*It is a living discourse directed to Christians of all times, not by a dead man, but by the one who has life.*

Have faith.

Amen.