

## Exit Lines     *John 12:20-33* | 3/18/2018

On November 7, 1962, Richard M. Nixon conceded defeat to the successful candidate for the California governorship, Pat Brown. Addressing a crowd of reporters at the Beverly Hilton Hotel, he castigated the media, saying, "You won't have Dick Nixon to kick around anymore, because, gentlemen, this is my last press conference." Although Nixon -- and much of America -- thought it was his exit line, it was not. In a remarkable comeback, Nixon returned to politics and in 1968 was elected president.

Then, on August 8, 1974, in the wake of the Watergate scandal, then-President Nixon resigned from that office. The final words of his speech on that occasion were: "To have served in this office is to have felt a very personal sense of kinship with each and every American. In leaving it, I do so with this prayer: May God's grace be with you in all the days ahead." Unlike his 1962 exit line, this one stuck.

There have been some great exit lines. Think of Gen. Douglas MacArthur - "Old soldiers never die; they just fade away." Or Lou Gehrig, proclaiming that despite his recent health issues that he considered himself to be "the luckiest man on the face of the Earth."

Or Professor Randy Pausch. About a year before he died, he delivered an upbeat lecture called *The Last Lecture: Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams*. It became a popular YouTube video, and later a best-selling book, *The Last Lecture*. Among the many lines that emerged from this lecture is Pausch's comment that if he only had three words of advice, "I'd say, 'Tell the truth.' If I had three more words, I'd add 'All the time.'"

Jesus certainly made a dramatic exit. And you might say that he had more than one. Jesus made a habit of leaving during his short ministry of three years. After John baptizes Jesus, he disappears for 40 days into the wilderness. He often made a quick exit from crowds to get away for private time. He left the Last Supper to go to Gethsemane to pray.

And then the big exit. He died. On a cross. A few sympathizers got his body and put it in a tomb. He was dead and entombed. A final exit? No, he reappears and spends some time with his disciples and then exits again. Into the clouds.

As for exit lines, Jesus had a few of those, too. The "seven last words" of Christ on the cross. Or the last words of Matthew's gospel, "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

So Jesus not only had a fabulous exit or exits, he had a few good lines, too. One of these lines, spoken only days before his death, is in today's text. "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself. He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die" (vv. 32-33).

Soon after Jesus enters Jerusalem for the Passover festival, some Greeks approach the disciple Philip and say to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus" (v. 21). Philip relays their words to Andrew, and then the two of them take the request to Jesus.

Jesus tells them -- in so many words -- that he will die soon, and then he compares himself to a seed. "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (v. 24).

These Greeks have grown up with Aesop's fables, so they know the power of a simple story to teach a moral lesson. Jesus is telling them that fruitfulness comes from going into the ground, and a *loss* of life leads to *eternal* life. And then he drops this exit line: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (v. 32). When he is lifted up on the cross, he will not repel people. Instead, he will draw people to him.

Fruitfulness and eternal life. Both are connected to the power of the cross, a cross that Jesus elsewhere says we must embrace as an instrument of our own metaphorical death. And when we do, we will bear fruit and live. So the cross, in a sense, is not an exit but an entrance -- an entrance to a new level or plane of living.

For some, the cross is both metaphorical and literal.

For an example, we need only turn to events that happened 50 years ago in Memphis, Tennessee. On April 4, 1968, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. On the night before his death, he gave a speech in which he said, "Like anybody, I would like to live a long life -- longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over, and I've seen the Promised Land." This was King's "mountaintop" speech, and it contained some powerful truths. He was right to say that "longevity has its place." But at the same time, he delivered a vision of the Promised Land that continues to inspire people today. "I've seen the Promised Land," said King. "I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land."

And how about eternal life? Jesus says that "those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (v. 25). Those who love life are those who are attached to the things of this world, and who want to become rich and famous and powerful. Jesus knows that you cannot take material goods and worldly achievements into the grave, so in the end these kinds of lives are lost. As the country song says, "I ain't never seen a hearse with a luggage rack."

Here's another example: This time it's an example of a metaphorical death, not a literal one. In this death, a baseball player "dies" to the temptation to put the god of money and financial reward ahead of his core values. Can we do that?

A couple of years ago, baseball player Adam LaRoche walked away from a \$13 million contract with the Chicago White Sox. He did this because he wanted his son to spend a lot of time with him and the team, and the team's management did not agree. He announced his retirement on Twitter, thanking God for the game of baseball and ending with the hashtag #FamilyFirst.

You might say that it was easy for him to do this because perhaps he already had earned millions and stashed it away. Maybe. But how much money you have doesn't deliver you from the demons of greed and avarice.

Fruitfulness and eternal life are both found in the cross, the daily cross we bear. The Greeks who came to see Jesus were probably mystified by his exit line: "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (v. 32). They saw the cross as a scandalous death and a humiliating defeat. As the apostle Paul said to the Corinthians, "Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified" (1 Corinthians 1:22-23).

We Christians proclaim Christ crucified because we know that the cross is the clearest sign of just how far Jesus will go to show us the love of God. Jesus died so that we could receive forgiveness and new life. He gave himself for us to demonstrate the value of a life of self-denial. Such a life is powerfully attractive, and people continue to be drawn by the power of the cross.

Let's follow where it leads us, toward fruitful service and eternal life. And perhaps, when our time comes to transition into eternal life, we could even use one of Jesus' exit lines -- "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

*Pastor Keith*