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PREACHING THE WITNESS OF LAST WORDS: HOW BIBLICAL FAREWELL
SPEECHES SHAPE CONTEMPORARY LISTENERS' THEOLOGICAL LEGACY

by

DEREK J. ENGFELT

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

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In Partial Fulfillment of

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2020

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ABSTRACT

PREACHING THE WITNESS OF LAST WORDS: HOW BIBLICAL FAREWELL SPEECHES SHAPE CONTEMPORARY LISTENERS' THEOLOGICAL LEGACY

by

Derek J. Engfelt

This project explores several last words speeches in Scripture, in an attempt to mine core theological convictions. It considers the subject of theological legacy. It seeks to ascertain whether or not the preaching of last words of witness will be effective in influencing listeners' consideration of their own cherished spiritual values. By means of a series of six sermons the author endeavored to encourage listeners to incorporate into their own lives of faith the treasured spiritual values that have been passed down to them as a theological legacy and to give greater thought as to what core theological convictions they would like to pass on to others as their own theological legacy. The project demonstrates that the preaching of last words of witness can effectively motivate listeners to treasure the legacy they have received and be intentional about sharing their own theological legacy with others.

This project also addresses the decline in the mainline denominational churches in both numbers and vitality, and presents one way to curb that decline and to assist the Christian Church in courageously moving forward, treasuring the cherished legacy of faith that has been passed down by those who have gone before us and faithfully sharing this cherished legacy with the generations to come.

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There are many I wish to thank for their assistance in this project:

To my beloved brothers and sisters in Christ at Immanuel Lutheran Church of Saratoga, CA. You were the reason I pursued this project in the first place, and I could not have learned what I did without your input. Special thanks to the members of my Parish Response Group, eight individuals who walked with me throughout the last three years. You encouraged me to stay the course, but more than that you increased my confidence in my own preaching, and you helped to solidify my call to preach.

Special thanks to Aart Bik who helped me sort through the collected data and prepare histograms to present the results in a more appealing fashion than it otherwise would have been.

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My dear family has been so supportive over the course of the past three years (particularly during the last “push” to complete the thesis). You have encouraged me, held down the fort during the weeks of residency, and assuaged much of the guilt that accompanied me during my necessary time away.

Thank you to my advisor, Richard Rehfeldt, for your encouragement, counsel and undaunted spirit. You were one of the reasons I pursued this program, and your willingness to return for one last stint was my salvation.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT..... ii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS iii

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS..... vii

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS..... viii

1. THE CHALLENGE BEFORE US 1

2. THEOLOGICAL AND BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS..... 12

3. LITERATURE REVIEW 19

4. PROJECT DESCRIPTION..... 27

 God’s Faithfulness – Sermon 1 29

 The Legacy of Gratitude – Sermon 2 35

 Commitment, Dedication and Service – Sermon 3 41

 Forgiveness: The Legacy of Life – Sermon 4 46

 The Legacy of Likewise Love – Sermon 5 49

 Legacy: Our Confident Hope – Sermon 6..... 56

5. ANALYSIS OF RESULTS 63

6. EVALUATION..... 81

7. REFLECTION 92

APPENDIX 1: SERMON #1: GOD’S FAITHFULNESS 98

APPENDIX 2: SERMON #2: THE LEGACY OF GRATITUDE..... 105

APPENDIX 3: SERMON #3: COMMITMENT, DEDICATION & SERVICE..... 111

APPENDIX 4: SERMON #4: FORGIVENESS: THE LEGACY OF LIFE 117

APPENDIX 5: SERMON #5: THE LEGACY OF LIKEWISE LOVE 123

APPENDIX 6: SERMON #6: LEGACY: OUR CONFIDENT HOPE 129

APPENDIX 7: INITIAL QUESTIONNAIRE..... 136

APPENDIX 8: SURVEY #1.....	138
APPENDIX 9: LAST WORDS PASSAGES	140
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	142

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ILC	Immanuel Lutheran Church of Saratoga, CA.
LBW	Lutheran Book of Worship
NIV	New International Version
RSV	Revised Standard Version

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figures

Figure 1: Number of Surveys Returned	64
Figure 2: Gender of Respondents	65
Figure 3: Progression of Listeners' Theological Convictions	66
Figure 4: Average Progression of Listeners' Theological Convictions.....	68
Figure 5: Progression of Listeners' Theological Legacy	69
Figure 6: Average Progression of Listeners' Theological Legacy	69
Figure 7: Progression of the Effectiveness of Listeners' Shared Legacy	70
Figure 8: Average Progression of the Effectiveness of Listeners' Shared Legacy.....	71
Figure 9: Sermon Series Influence on Listeners' Reported Awareness and Appreciation of God's Faithfulness	74
Figure 10: Sermon Series Influence on Listeners' Reported Awareness and Appreciation of Gratitude	74
Figure 11: Sermon Series Influence on Listeners' Reported Awareness and Appreciation of Dedication & Service.....	75
Figure 12: Sermon Series Influence on Listeners' Reported Awareness and Appreciation of Forgiveness	75
Figure 13: Sermon Series Influence on Listeners' Reported Awareness and Appreciation of Love	76

Figure 14: Sermon Series Influence on Listeners’ Reported Awareness and Appreciation of Hope..... 76

Figure 15: Strength of Sermon Series in Shaping Listeners’ Sense of Theological Legacy 79

Tables

Table 1: Initial Assessment of Spiritual Values..... 72

Table 2: Sermon Series Influence on Listeners’ Awareness & Appreciation of Spiritual Values – Group Response..... 73

Table 3: Sermon Series Influence on Assisting Listeners in Thinking Through Personal Core Theological Convictions – Group Response..... 77

Table 4: Sermon Series Influence on Assisting Listeners in Thinking Through Hoped-For Theological Legacy – Group Response 78

Table 5: Sermon Series Effectiveness in Motivating Listeners’ Sharing of Their Theological Legacy – Group Response 79

CHAPTER 1

THE CHALLENGE BEFORE US

As the pastor of Immanuel Lutheran Church (ILC) of Saratoga, I considered the context in which I minister to my parishioners. What project should I choose for my doctoral thesis? I knew I wanted to do something that would serve my congregation members well. There were many possibilities, of course; there were many options from which I could choose that would be of personal interest and benefit my congregation, as well as contribute to the greater good of the Christian Church. I found it difficult to narrow down what I wanted to do. I felt like I was living out the Dr. Seuss story, *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* “You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself any direction you choose. You’re on your own. And you know what you know. And YOU are the one who’ll decide where to go.”¹ Except that there were too many directions I could go, and I wasn’t at all sure which direction I would or should go.

However, my attention lingered on the fact that ILC has many senior members that make up its body. I wondered: Could there be any more important task for my senior members than for them to take the best of their life experiences, the most important lessons they had learned (specifically in regard to matters of faith), and to share them with the generations that follow in their steps? An African proverb says, “When an old person dies, a library burns to the ground.” All the information and life experience that

¹ Dr. Seuss, *Oh, The Places You'll Go!* (New York: Random House, 1990), 2.

have been gained in that human life is gone. The word *legacy* came to mind, and ever since it has made its home in my brain and in my heart.

Perhaps the beginnings of this work started when I was just a boy, when my father would take me to visit his grandfather (my great-grandfather) who lived in a nearby town. I don't remember ever being all that eager to sacrifice precious time from my boyhood freedom to make those visits, but I do remember leaving each visit feeling grateful for having spent the time we did. My great-grandfather, Sam Gregic, was an animated and engaging storyteller (as is my father). He told his stories so many times they came to have a form of their own. I not only remember much of the content of his stories; I also remember the way he told them. His stories would often include his own interruptions: "Did I tell you's this before?" He was such a passionate raconteur, and one so amused by his own narration, that he easily engaged the attention of his great-grandchild. "Yes, grandpa, you *have* (told us this story before), but keep going." I said this not just because I had been taught to be polite when I interacted with my elders; I really wanted to hear him tell the story again. His enthusiasm was contagious. And the legacy he left me, the legacy contained in the stories he told, was an important one. There is much of my great-grandfather that lives in me.

In more recent days, the subject of legacy has continued to attract my attention, as I have read several books on the subject (see chapter 3 below for more information).

Furthermore, over the past decade of my ministry, I have made an important connection with a local funeral home. When families arrive at the mortuary, they will sometimes make it known that they would like to have a minister lead a service for their dearly departed loved one, but they have no congregational membership and no pastor to

call their own. Often when these situations arise, one of the funeral directors will call and invite me to serve in that role. Over the years, I have done more than 125 services in this capacity. To prepare for each service I meet with the family in advance to learn about the one who has died and attempt to ascertain the legacy they have left for their survivors.

Moreover, as I myself advance in years, I have become more thoughtful about the meaning and purpose of my own life, the spiritual values I cherish, and the treasure I want to pass on to my children, to my grandchildren, and to those who listen to my preaching. I want to be intentional about doing so.

I have also come to the conviction that it is not only personally satisfying to pass on one's legacy to the next generation, but critical that the treasured faith that has passed down to us from our ancestors be transferred from us to those who will follow in our steps, so that they, in turn, will carry the faith forward.

The evangelist Ron Hutchcraft asks, "What more could I be doing to actively sow Jesus in the hearts of my children and my grandchildren?"² He continues by inviting his listeners to wonder, "Isn't it amazing to think that you can plant His [God's] seed in your generation – and help change your family forever, for generations?"³

As we arrive at the end of the second decade of our present millennium, we find ourselves in the midst of a crisis in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (the ELCA, the denomination to which I belong). Our membership is decreasing.⁴ With fewer

² Ron Hutchcraft, *A Word With You*, "Genealogies, Graveyards and Grandkids," Feb. 21, 2020. https://www.hutchcraft.com/a-word-with-you/your-personal-power/genealogies-graveyards-and-grandkids-8640?mc_cid=abfa83b7fb&mc_eid=79d739f4cc

³ Hutchcraft, *Genealogies, Graveyards and Grandkids*.

⁴When the denomination was founded in 1988, the membership was 5.25 million. In 2015, the numbers had decreased to 3.67 million. Found on elca.org, searching under "membership trends."

donors to rely upon, many churches are finding finances scarce and face budgetary challenges. The morale of many of my pastoral colleagues has diminished. Churches are closing. As a denomination, we are in decline. And there is widespread concern that the ELCA may not survive.⁵

The ELCA is not alone in this predicament. Many other denominations have also experienced a decrease in membership over the past several decades, including the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ),⁶ the Reformed Church in America,⁷ the United Church of Christ (Congregationalist),⁸ the Episcopal Church,⁹ the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.),¹⁰ the United Methodist Church,¹¹ and the American Baptist Church.¹²

Kristine Stache, interim president at Wartburg Seminary, a school affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, shared in a presentation given on February

http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/ELCA_Membership_1988_2010.pdf?_ga=2.165101759.1868299654.1571098950-67949767.1571098950

⁵ See Dwight Zscheile, “Will the ELCA be Gone in 30 Years?” September 5, 2019, <https://faithlead.luthersem.edu/will-the-elca-will-be-gone-in-30-years/> accessed Oct. 14, 2019.

⁶ See Joe Carter, “Fact Checker: Are All Christian Denominations in Decline?” March 17, 2015. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/factchecker-are-all-christian-denominations-in-decline/> The Christian Church declined 67% from 1965 to 2012, from 1,918,471 to 625,252. Accessed Feb. 10, 2020.

⁷ Carter, “Fact Checker...” The Reformed Church in America declined 62% from 1967 to 2014, from 384,751 to 145,466.

⁸ Carter, “Fact Checker...” The United Church of Christ declined 52% from 1965 to 2012, from 2,070,413 to 998,906.

⁹ Carter, “Fact Checker...” The Episcopal Church declined 49% from 1966 to 2013, from 3,647,297 to 1,866, 758.

¹⁰ Carter, “Fact Checker...” The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) declined 47% from 1967 to 2013, from 3,304,321 to 1,760,200.

¹¹ Carter, “Fact Checker...” The United Methodist Church declined 33% from 1967 to 2012, from 11,026, 976 to 7,391,911.

¹² Carter, “Fact Checker...” The American Baptist Church declined only 2% from 1967 to 2012, from 1,335,342 to 1,308,054.

14, 2020 to the Episcopal Church’s Executive Council that with the current rate of decline, they will cease to have any Sunday morning worship attendance in thirty years.¹³

The Episcopal Church’s 2018 parochial reports reveal a 17.5 percent decline in baptized members and a 24.9 percent decline in average Sunday attendance between 2008 and 2018.¹⁴

If the rate of decline experienced over that decade continues, The Episcopal Church will have no Sunday attendance in 30 years and no baptized members in 47 years.

As with other mainline Protestant denominations, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has experienced a similar decline, with 35 years left until it runs out of baptized members and 23 years until it runs out of Sunday worshippers, if current rates continue.¹⁵

In addition, the number of American adults who describe themselves as Christians has also declined significantly over the past decade.¹⁶

All these statistics speak with one voice in alerting us that the future of the mainline church in the United States is facing a significant challenge; and, if it is going to survive – let alone thrive – in the decades to come, it is both critical and imperative that

¹³ See Egan Millard, “Executive Council approves readmission of Cuba, selects Louisville for 2024 General Convention,” Episcopal News Service, Feb. 17, 2020, accessed Feb. 25, 2020. <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2020/02/17/executive-council-approves-readmission-of-cuba-selects-louisville-for-2024-general-convention/>

¹⁴ The Episcopal Church, Research and Statistics, accessed Feb. 25, 2020, <https://episcopalchurch.org/research/parochial-report-results>

¹⁵ Millard, “Executive Council...”

¹⁶ Pew Research Center poll conducted in 2018 and 2019 showed that American adults who self-identify as Christian was 65%; in 2009 it was 77%, a decline of 12% in one decade. <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>, accessed Oct. 18, 2019.

significant and intentional effort be made to pass on our cherished faith to the generations to come.

In the early 60's, the only Lutheran church in Saratoga, CA was a congregation called Prince of Peace.¹⁷ The congregation was going through hard times; the church body was fracturing. The American Lutheran Church, another Lutheran denomination, recognized the need to minister to Lutherans who were not being well served, and they saw an opportunity to begin a mission congregation. Immanuel Lutheran Church¹⁸ was the name of the congregation, and its founding pastor was Gerald (Jerry) Amundson. Fully two-thirds of ILC's charter membership consisted of members from Prince of Peace, while the remainder was made up largely of transplanted Lutherans from the Midwest. In that day the modus operandi of increasing church membership in California was to find and gather those who already considered themselves Lutheran. Not much thought was given to reaching out to non-Lutherans or non-Christians, to extend invitations to them to join us in our ministry and mission.

Today, however, there are few transplanted Lutherans in our community to gather. The problem for us, both locally and nationally, is not that of locating lost sheep. The challenge before us is to increase the size of the flock to join us in mission and to financially support our mission by adding sheep that have never been part of the Lutheran fold. It is also a challenge to reach out to those who formerly belonged to Lutheran congregations but who no longer worship or are part of the ministry of any Lutheran congregation.

¹⁷ Prince of Peace Lutheran Church was a member of the Lutheran Church in America.

¹⁸ Immanuel Lutheran Church of Saratoga, California, began worshipping together in 1964.

Another change that has made our challenge significant and that has added to our crisis is the decrease in the number of children in Lutheran families. It is rare that we find large families present in our congregations today. In past generations congregational members could ensure the ongoing work of the church simply by having children and raising them in the Lutheran faith. Today we have fewer children, and the likelihood of them remaining in the community after high school is slight.

Mobility is yet another factor that adds challenge to the ongoing ministry in many congregations. It is rare that people keep the same job for a decade or more; it is common for families to transition out of the area for new job opportunities. A poll conducted by FM3 Research for the Silicon Valley Leadership Group between January 11 and January 19, 2020, found that there are more people thinking about moving from the Bay Area than those who are thinking about staying.¹⁹ While I inherited a congregation that consisted of many longtime members who claimed this congregation as their own and who had invested in its ministry and mission over many years (by giving their time, sharing their talents, and supporting the ministry financially), I have found that it takes most new members a fair number of years to arrive at a sense of ownership and to begin investing in the work of the church, as did those who are now aging members. It is not uncommon for pastors and congregational leaders to devote precious energy to increase new members' connection and investment in the life of the congregation, only to have them move on to other communities within a few years. The process must then start all

¹⁹ Of the 1,257 registered voters polled in Alameda, Contra Costa, San Francisco, Santa Clara and San Mateo counties, 47% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "I am likely to move out of the Bay Area in the next few years," 45% disagreed, and 10% reported that they had definite plans to move. The poll had a margin of error of +/- 2.8 percentage points. *San Jose Mercury News*, "How Fed Up Are You?" February 23, 2020.

over again – for those who move to new communities, as well as for the congregational members of ILC. With the increased membership turnover, we are compelled to “replenish ourselves” on a more regular basis if we wish to maintain the health and vitality of our church body and its service in our community.

The cost of living in our community is also a factor. Many of our retirees leave the area to find places that are more amenable to their decreased income. A move means adjustments in many aspects of one’s life, including finding a new church of which to be a part and to call their own. Adjustments need to be made in the church members left behind (replenishing their support), as well as in the church that will receive them (incorporating them into their new congregation).

Still another challenge we face is the increase in the number of activities that vie for the attention of persons of all ages and who live increasingly busy lives. And of course these activities are not limited to Mondays through Saturdays; Sunday is no longer sacrosanct. Parents have children hopping from one activity to another, and church activities are just one choice among many when it comes to the allocation of time, attention and resources on the part of both parents and children.

The consequence of all these challenges is that our denomination finds itself grouped with many other denominations throughout our nation as a religious organization that is declining in membership. Many churches within the conference to which ILC belongs are hardly able to support a fulltime pastor. Only a small minority of churches in our conference could be said to be thriving in their ministry.

Our ministry is changing; and change it must. We need to face this crisis head-on and learn new ways of passing the faith on to the next generation of believers. Second

Timothy comes to mind: “And the things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.”²⁰

The Psalmist creates his work with purpose and intention, in part, to affect future generations: “This will be written for the generation to come; / That a people yet to be created may praise the LORD” (Psalm 102:18). And again,

We will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done... he commanded our forefathers to teach their children, so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children.²¹

As a congregation and as a denomination, our track record of passing on the faith has not been commendable. Part of our confession each Ash Wednesday at ILC includes the words, “We confess to you, Lord, all our past unfaithfulness.... our failure to commend the faith that is in us.” But if we consider our faith valuable, not only on a personal level but of benefit to all people, and if we are at all concerned about our denomination surviving and continuing to be a vital organization in the next generation, we must be intentional about passing on the living faith to the next generation.

What, then, are the central spiritual values of our Christian faith? And how do we faithfully pass them on to the next generation? How can we share our core theological convictions with the next generations, that they might take their place alongside us and, when our course on earth is complete, rise up as the new leaders, witnesses and mentors? How can we, like the Samaritan woman in John 4, do our part, so that the result of our

²⁰ 2 Timothy 2:2. This and all other Scriptural quotations (unless otherwise noted) are taken from the *New American Standard Bible* (La Habra, CA: Foundation Publications, for the Lockman Foundation, 1971).

²¹ Psalm 78:4b,5b-6, *The Holy Bible: New International Version* (New Brunswick: International Bible Society, 1984).

witness will be like hers: “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this One is indeed the Savior of the world” (John 4:42).

One of my intentions in this thesis is to focus on the witness of last words as a way to uncover the core spiritual values of our faith, values that have been passed down to us and that can be passed on to the generations that follow. I contend that those who share final words with their audience (and know them to be final or likely to be final) take no little care to consider their lifelong learning and experiences and to draw from them the very best of what they might share with their listeners.²²

Robert Wall comments on Acts 20:17-38, one of the last words speeches addressed in this thesis, “There is virtual unanimity among commentators that this is Paul’s farewell speech, serving to publish his ‘last will and testament’ to a gathering of close associates and friends.”²³ A last word speech can serve as an instrument to convey the legacy of a speaker. It can also urge hearers to carry on the goal of the speaker; namely, to continue the ministry that person had and gave witness to in an attempt to “be in this world as Jesus was in this world.”

The case may be made that what we have recorded in Scripture is not everything a person said to every audience. What we read as last words speeches, then, may not have

²² After Christian musician Keith Green died in a tragic plane crash in 1982 at the age of 28, those involved in his ministry focused on his last words not only to discover and frame the meaning of their own lives here on earth, but also to share a meaningful legacy which would inspire others in their own lives of Christian service. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-FCSYf4Oie8> starting at 7:30; accessed on Oct. 23, 2019.

²³ Robert Wall, “The Acts of the Apostles” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible In Twelve Volumes*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 280.

been last words at all. Notwithstanding this valid point, I maintain that the biblical author's inclusion of such last words speeches still bears the intention of giving deeper thought to what is being shared, much more than day-to-day, ordinary speech.

I also will not constrain myself to select only the *very last* words that are shared by anyone with any particular audience. As an example, I will draw from Moses' words in the Book of Deuteronomy, which, in its entirety, can be taken as Moses' last presentation to the Children of Israel, given to prepare them to enter the Promised Land.

In appendix 9 are listed all the Scriptural passages that contain the last words speeches examined below in chapter four of this thesis and which were addressed in the sermons preached for this project.

By focusing on these last words speeches in the Bible, I hope to influence those who listen to the sermons I will preach that are based upon them, that they might think more deeply about their own core spiritual values (their own central theological commitments), that they might consider more earnestly the importance of passing on these cherished values to the generations that follow, and that they might be motivated and equipped to effectively share their treasured legacy. By intentionally and enthusiastically sharing these core spiritual values, I trust the Holy Spirit will work through their own witness to create faith in a new generation of believers.²⁴

²⁴ "Through the Word and sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given, who works faith where and when it pleases God." Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000). Augsburg Confession, Article 5: The Ministry of the Church.

CHAPTER 2

THEOLOGICAL AND BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

Many spiritual values can be identified in the Scriptural canon. Paul famously speaks of the fruit of the Spirit in his epistle to the Galatians: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law” (Galatians 5:22-23, RSV). Paul also writes in the well-known “love chapter” of the Bible, “So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13:13, RSV). Micah succinctly sums up the prophetic appeal, “He has told you, O man, what is good; / And what does the LORD require of you / But to do justice, to love kindness / And to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8). Many other spiritual values from the biblical canon can be identified, as well.

As I surveyed different last words speeches with the expectation that I would find “the best of the best,” I hoped to find the cherished core values of the speakers and the communities of which they were a part. Six central values were identified:

The first core value identified in my research and presented in the body of this thesis is the *faithfulness of God*. To say that God is faithful is to assert that God is trustworthy. When I think of my own spiritual legacy, one conviction I would like to pass on to others in the next generation (not just to my own children, but to all believers whose lives of faith are touched and influenced by my own) is the conviction that God is

trustworthy and true. God is our rock (1 Samuel 2:2; Matthew 7:24-25), our refuge (Psalm 46:1-3), the sure foundation upon which we can build our faith. Even in the midst of defeat and destruction, God continues to be faithful, and God's faithfulness gives us reason to hope for better days to come.¹

God's faithfulness is nothing less than the foundational conviction upon which all others are built. "We love, because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19). God is the great Initiator. God goes first. With respect to God, we humans only and always act in response to what God has first done for us.

King Solomon likewise encourages those in his tutelage, "Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. Then you will win favor and a good name in the sight of God and man" (Proverbs 3:3-4). The apostle Paul, writing to the Church of God in Corinth, framed it this way: "Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God. In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy" (1 Corinthians 4:1-2). And in the ELCA document *Trustworthy Servants of the People of God*, it is written: "The public nature of the church's ministries makes the character of its ministers central to the church's own trustworthiness."²

In each of the spiritual values gleaned from these last words speeches can be found a quality of the character of God (as well as a component of our own lives of faith, lived in response to the call we have received from God to be God's voice, hands and feet

¹ Cf. Lamentations 3:22-23, as the prophet declares God's faithfulness in the midst of the destruction of the Holy City of Jerusalem by their enemies.

² *Trustworthy Servants of the People of God*, Draft copy, March 4, 2019.

in the world today). And so, while faithfulness is the first and primary theological value considered in the sermon series, included in this spiritual value are both the faithfulness of God, as well as the faithfulness to which each one of us is called as God's chosen and sent children. (The legacy we have been given through Scripture and the witness of faithful persons who have passed on the faith and their faith convictions to us is to live as reliable and trustworthy people in all that we say and do.)

The second value identified in the last words speeches of Holy Scripture is gratitude. It is fitting that gratitude follows the faithfulness of God, for it is an appropriate and fitting human response to divine character and action. To truly appreciate and appropriately respond to the goodness and faithfulness of God, one cannot help but express gratitude for all that God has done on our behalf. Indeed, throughout Scripture, an appreciation of God's being and doing is expressed. The prophet Habakkuk expresses gratitude even in the worst of times, for he is confident that the faithfulness of God is such that God's eternal goodness will overcome every temporal tragedy that he experiences. The prophet makes the good confession,

Though the fig tree should not blossom, / And there be no fruit on the vines,
 /*Though* the yield of the olive should fail, / And the fields produce no food, /
 Though the flock should be cut off from the fold, / And there be no cattle in the
 stalls, / Yet I will exult in the LORD, / I will rejoice in the God of my salvation
 (Habakkuk 3:17-18, italics in original).

Next, I recognized in several biblical last word speeches that in addition to a response of gratitude, the people of God responded to the goodness and faithfulness of God by dedicating themselves to God in lives of committed service.³ Leaders are intent to

³ See Isaiah 6:8, not in itself part of a last words speech, but an example of the prophet's willingness, in response to God, to dedicate himself to committed service.

challenge the people to devote themselves to live lives of faithfulness as God's people and to carry the baton of faith into the next generation.

Scripture reminds us of many times when the faith was not passed on from one generation to the next, when the children did not remember the faith of their ancestors. When new generations turned their backs on the ways of the Lord, idolatry and all manner of evil followed.⁴ So the leaders were intent to do all that they could to stir up passion in the people who followed after them, in an attempt to persuade them to take seriously the words of the Lord, so that they would follow the holy precepts which had been given to them as the people of God.⁵

The next (and last) three core theological values gleaned from the biblical last words speeches surveyed were forgiveness, love and hope. Of course, all the commitments made by the people of God, no matter how sincere and insistent⁶ they are that they will be faithful and will follow in God's ways are tainted, sinful and short-lived.⁷ Forgiveness, then, is a necessity. The grace of God is inherent in the extension of God's forgiveness. Forgiveness, almost by definition, is not something that can be earned by the one receiving it. No matter how sincere the appeal for mercy, no matter how contrite the confession, forgiveness is finally a gift of grace that emanates from the character of God.

⁴ Cf. Judges 2:10; 8:33-35; 10:6.

⁵ Cf. Joshua 1:8.

⁶ Cf. Joshua 24:16-18.

⁷ Cf. Joshua 24:19; Romans 7:15ff.

Even so, those who receive forgiveness are to extend similar forgiveness to others.⁸ Forgiveness is not merely a necessity in our relationship with God – a *sine qua non* in our relationship with God – it is an absolute necessity in any human relationship, if that relationship is going to continue and grow. Forgiveness is a necessity in any community, for sin and brokenness are pervasive in any and every community. If justice is an inherent part of what it means to live faithfully as God’s adherents and representatives, forgiveness is its counterpart.

Love is the penultimate core spiritual value identified in the biblical last words of witness speeches. Over the years I have made a practice of asking confirmands what is their most appreciated characteristic of God. Far and above all other responses is their appreciation of God’s love. Indeed, when it comes to describing the character of God, the chief and defining characteristic is love, both within and beyond Scripture. John, the beloved disciple, takes it a step further when he defines God as love.⁹

Indeed, as those beloved of God, we have been called to love one another.¹⁰ Jesus would, in fact, tell his disciples that others would recognize them as his followers when they loved one another.¹¹ God’s love – *agape* love – is perfect. On our own, we fall short of this love (and the recognition of our shortcoming is sometimes painful). Still, having

⁸ Cf. Colossians 3:13.

⁹ 1 John 4:8

¹⁰ Cf. 1 John 3:1-2,18.

¹¹ John 13:35

received *agape* love from God, we are empowered to love with God's love, and to teach our children to do the same.¹²

In the center of his dissertation on spiritual gifts,¹³ the apostle Paul speaks of *agape* love as the greatest of all the gifts given by God's Holy Spirit.¹⁴ I would be remiss if I did not draw attention to love as a treasured spiritual value. Again, the apostle writes, "For Christ's love compels us" (2 Corinthians 5:14, NIV). And indeed, followers of Jesus are compelled to cherish this core spiritual value and to do all that they can to inculcate it in the next generation as a treasured theological conviction and defining mandate for how we are to live our lives as Christian people.

The final core value identified in the biblical last words speeches I surveyed is hope. Paul identifies hope as one of the gifts of God's Holy Spirit.¹⁵ Hope is, fittingly, the last spiritual value shared in this sermon series. What a great gift we can pass on to those who follow after us, to unambiguously display, especially in our last days, the hope that is in us.¹⁶ And what peace can fill our hearts to know that we are leaving with those who follow after us the hope that we have in Christ Jesus our Lord. This hope is given to us by God in and through Jesus Christ.¹⁷ The Psalmist confesses, "For you have been my hope, O Sovereign LORD, my confidence since my youth" (Psalm 71:5, NIV). And again, "We

¹² Cf. Deuteronomy 6:4-9.

¹³ 1 Corinthians 12-14

¹⁴ 1 Corinthians 13:13

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 13:13

¹⁶ 1 Peter 3:15

¹⁷ 2 Thessalonians 2:16

wait in hope for the LORD; he is our help and our shield. In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name. May your unfailing love rest on us, O LORD, even as we put our hope in you” (Psalm 33:20-22, NIV).

The hope that we have in Christ is not only for the eternal life that is ours in Jesus. The divine gift of hope can be ours right here and now, enabling us to live hope-filled lives, even (and especially) in a world that is too often hopeless and is all but disintegrating around us. Our hope is secure – our future is secure – in Christ Jesus our Lord, who will ultimately overcome¹⁸ all the evil powers that rise up against him. Indeed, the apostle urges those who encounter persecution to take heart: “You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world” (I John 4:4, NIV).

These are certainly not all of the spiritual values we might hope to pass on to the next generation. But they may well be considered central, cherished values by many Christ followers, as evidenced in the last words speeches surveyed in this thesis.

¹⁸ Revelation 17:14

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature that relates to the key words and themes of my thesis is vast. The themes of this thesis include the following: the necessity of biblical preaching for the health of the church, proclamation as witness, the value of legacy and the importance of last words. I will now address some of the works that have influenced my thinking on these themes that make up the major components of my thesis work.

More than forty years ago, Leander Keck wrote *The Bible in the Pulpit*. In it, he identified what he called biblical malaise¹ and enumerated several reasons for the lack of emphasis (or any use at all) of the Bible in the pulpit, including the rise of biblical criticism (and how a preacher deals with it) and the confusion that has arisen about the Bible's proper place in the church.² He writes, "Unless biblical preaching is recovered, the church as a whole will continue to suffer from amnesia."³ The importance of identifying and emphasizing the cherished theological values that have been passed down to us as a treasured legacy, as evidenced in last words speeches found in the Bible, is clear and critical for the health, momentum and vitality of the modern Christian Church.

¹ Leander Keck, *The Bible in the Pulpit* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976), 16.

² Keck, 17ff.

³ Keck, 32.

Before Keck, James D. Smart wrote *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church*.⁴ In it he asserts, “The church that no longer hears the essential message of the Scriptures soon ceases to understand what it is for and is open to be captured by the dominant religious philosophy of the moment.”⁵ He later states,

Every renewal of the church in history has been a consequence of men [sic], after a time of deafness, recovering the ears with which to hear not just the words but the strange, disturbing, yet gracious, word that is somehow hidden in the words until it meets the hearer who is ready for it.⁶

If the church is to maintain its identity and integrity, the central message of the Scriptures and the cherished theological values found therein must be faithfully proclaimed and transmitted to each successive generation.

In his book *The Witness of Preaching*,⁷ Thomas G. Long writes of the image of the Christian preacher as *witness*.⁸

The preacher as witness is.... authoritative because of.... what the preacher has seen and heard.... The preacher is listening for a voice, looking for a presence, hoping for the claim of God to be encountered through the text. Until this happens, there is nothing for the preacher to say.⁹

He goes on to say,

[B]iblical preaching involves telling the truth about – bearing witness to – what happens when a biblical text intersects some aspect of our life and exerts a claim

⁴ James D. Smart, *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970).

⁵ Smart, 10. See also 2 Timothy 4:3.

⁶ Smart, 25.

⁷ Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989).

⁸ Long, 41, italics in the original.

⁹ Long, 44.

upon us... Biblical preaching happens when a preacher prayerfully goes to listen to the Bible on behalf of the people and then speaks on Christ's behalf what he or she hears there.¹⁰

Touching on the power of passing on one's legacy of faith to the next generation, Long writes, "Throughout its history, the church has discovered that when it goes to the scripture in openness and trust, it finds itself uniquely addressed there by God and its identity as the people of God shaped by that encounter."¹¹ Regarding the theological legacy that has been received from the generations that have gone before us, Long writes, "Preachers go to scripture not only with a critically informed understanding of the Bible but also with prior understandings of the Christian faith in rich theological traditions."¹² Finally, Long writes, "A theologically informed interpreter of scripture enters the text guided by a map drawn and refined by those who have come to this place before."¹³ As preachers of the Word, we occupy the pulpits of those who have come before us, and we carry on the legacy of faith left to us by the faithful departed.

For Long's last words in the book, he quotes from 1 John 1:1-2: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and witness to it."¹⁴

¹⁰ Long, 48.

¹¹ Long, 50.

¹² Long, 52.

¹³ Long, 53.

¹⁴ Long, 198. The biblical quote is from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible except for the word "witness" which the author uses in place of "testimony."

Consistent with the theme of witness, the apostle Paul speaks about his own ministry as that “which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24). And the apostle John writes, “And the witness is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son” (1 John 5:11). The Scriptures contain the witness of those who have experienced Christ firsthand and have heard the proclamation of Christ with their own ears.¹⁵

Many *last words* works have influenced my thinking on the subject of legacy. I will address some of the more important ones in the paragraphs that follow.

In Dr. Paul Kalanithi’s book, *When Breath Becomes Air*, the neurosurgeon attempts to come to grips, at the age of 36, with a personal diagnosis of metastatic stage IV lung cancer. He writes the book (finished posthumously by his wife, Lucy) after his diagnosis. The book is about his journey, his heart, and the meaning he found in life in the midst of death. For me, some of the most meaningful and inspirational words were the following, “The physician’s duty is not to stave off death or return patients to their old lives, but to take into our arms a patient and family whose lives have disintegrated and work until they can stand back up and face, and make sense of, their own existence.”¹⁶ These words are undoubtedly a compendium of Dr. Kalanithi’s deepest learning and strongest convictions, through which he seeks to impart to his readers a hopeful legacy.

¹⁵ See Luke 1:1-4.

¹⁶ Paul Kalanithi, *When Breath Becomes Air* (New York: Random House, 2016), 166.

Mitch Albom recounts interactions between himself and Morris (Morrie) Schwartz, one of Albom's college professors who had been diagnosed with ALS.¹⁷ Visiting with Schwartz on a weekly basis, Albom learned of Schwartz's cherished values, as well as the value of life itself. The time spent with his mentor during his last days had a pronounced influence on Albom's life, and the legacy Schwartz left in his last words was profound, as it not only influenced that author – but this one, as well.

In Frank Delaney's novel, *Ireland*, an itinerant storyteller conveys valuable components of what it means to be Irish. A leader in the 1916 Easter Rising (Ireland's fight for independence) engages in conversation with the main character near the end of the novel: "I'm a storyteller. That's all I am." "That's all? How can you say, 'That's all'? You may be the most important man here. Who else is going to create our memory? What would be the point of this if nobody told generations to come what we meant?"¹⁸ It is an important question that can easily be applied to the Christian faith and to the cherished values we hold dear. In light of these words one could also say that it behooves all dedicated disciples of our Lord Jesus to faithfully share the gospel with others.

Carolyn Ann Knight, taking Joshua 17 as her sermon text, urges her listeners to bear through hardship and challenges them toward a firmer commitment, that they might leave a larger legacy. In the preaching passage, the half tribes of Manasseh and Ephraim present their case before Joshua, asking for a larger portion of land in which their people can settle.¹⁹ They desire more land not for the purpose of selfish gain. Knowing they are a

¹⁷ Mitch Albom, *Tuesdays with Morrie* (New York: Doubleday, 1997).

¹⁸ Frank Delaney, *Ireland* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005), 553.

¹⁹ Carolyn Ann Knight, "If Thou Be A Great People," in *Patterns of Preaching: A Sermon Sampler*, ed. Ronald J. Allen (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1998), 225-230.

“numerous people” (Joshua 17:14), they take measures to provide adequate space for their children and grandchildren and leave them a larger legacy.

Preaching on the occasion of a church anniversary, William B. McClain considers the legacy of faith passed down to the present church by the departed saints of the congregation and of the blessed communion they share in Christ.²⁰ The preacher challenges his listeners not to “shrink from the struggle”²¹ but to live faithfully and not fail those who’ve sacrificed on their behalf and entrusted the faith to them as a precious stewardship.

Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, using the first chapter of the Book of Esther as her preaching text, addresses the cost of saying *no* – and the legacy it leaves.²² The preacher considers the refusal of Queen Vashti to be at the King’s beck and call, and Tubbs Tisdale communicates to her listeners that just as it is important to collect things of value to pass on to the next generation, it is just as critical to commit to keep oneself from those things that would do soulful harm or compromise integrity. Tubbs Tisdale persuasively encourages her listeners to devote themselves to a stance shared by Martin Luther: *I will NOT go THERE. HERE I stand.*

Concerning the subject of last words and their relative importance to all other words, Pablo Jimenez deems the apostle Paul’s epistle to the Philippians his farewell

²⁰ William B. McClain, “I Believe in the Communion of Saints,” in *Patterns of Preaching: A Sermon Sampler*, ed. Ronald J. Allen (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1998), 185-189.

²¹ Allen, 188.

²² Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, “God’s ‘No’ and Ours,” in *Patterns of Preaching: A Sermon Sampler*, ed. Ronald J. Allen (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1998), 201-206.

speech,²³ his “last will and testament,”²⁴ and he lifts up the theme of partnership. Partnership is not one of the cherished spiritual values I chose to highlight in my preaching series, although I might well have done so.

Randy Pausch delivered his last lecture on September 18, 2007 at Carnegie Mellon University, which he called, “Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams.”²⁵ It was his final chance to address this particular audience and to convey the wisdom he had gathered and gleaned through the years. He distilled his life’s work and experience into a lecture in which he sought to pass on a legacy to his colleagues, students and children.

In John 16:33 Jesus says, “These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage: I have overcome the world.” Karoline Lewis comments, “‘I have conquered’ the world is the only time this verb is used in the Gospel of John and is in the perfect tense. It is a remarkable statement at this point in the Gospel, as Jesus’ last words to his disciples before he turns to his Father in prayer.”²⁶ Indeed, our victory in Christ might well be considered a treasured theological value, as it is highlighted here in John 16 as one of Christ’s last words. However, I did not choose to preach on this passage in my last words preaching series, nor did I select Christ’s victory over the world’s tribulation and our victory in Christ as one of the six cherished spiritual values to pass on in living legacy.

²³ Pablo Jimenez, “Paul’s Subversive Partnership” in *Patterns of Preaching: A Sermon Sampler*, ed. Ronald J. Allen (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1998), 100.

²⁴ Allen, 101.

²⁵ Randy Pausch, *The Last Lecture* (New York: Hyperion, 2008).

²⁶ Karoline Lewis, *John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 208.

Anne Lamott, writing a book about writing, offers up an insightful serendipity: “To live as if we’re dying can set us free.”²⁷ This statement speaks to the relative importance of *last words* as compared to ordinary, everyday words. If *living as if we are dying* serves to enrich life and moves us to cherish life, to know that our words might well be the last ones spoken to a particular person at a particular place and time can motivate us to take great care in choosing wisely the words we will indeed speak.

And, as if to highlight the value of the gift of life, Leo Tolstoy does so by showing us the opposite. The masterful storyteller portrays a life lived without meaningful purpose achieved. Ivan Ilych gives no last words, no final speech, but instead *thinks aloud* about the absence of his life’s meaning.²⁸

Although there is a vast array of resources that focus on the subjects of biblical preaching, proclamation as witness, last words and legacy, I was unable to find a series of sermons preached on the witness of last words for the purpose of provoking and challenging listeners’ thinking about their own core theological convictions and with the intention of motivating them to share these treasured convictions as a theological legacy to the generations that follow in their steps. The work of this thesis attempts to do just that, and my hope is that this work will spur on other preachers to address these and other last words speeches, to the end that listeners will gain a deeper appreciation of the faith they have received, so that they will be motivated to passionately share the faith for the furthering and upbuilding of God’s Church.

²⁷ Anne Lamott, *Bird By Bird* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), 125.

²⁸ Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilych* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 2004).

CHAPTER 4

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

In an attempt to mine the core Christian values that have been passed down to us through the ages, I set out to preach a series of six sermons I called *The Witness of Last Words & Legacy*. In this series, my primary focus was on last words speeches in Holy Scripture, with the understanding that those who spoke last words to any particular audience did so with greater intention. The core values they cherished (the values that molded and shaped their identity) would surely rise to the forefront of their minds, find their way into the words spoken from their lips, and be shared with those who listened to their testimony of faith.

Might the preaching of last words of witness in Scripture have an effect on today's sermon listeners' sense of legacy and on their motivation to actually pass on this legacy? In an attempt to measure the effectiveness of the sermons preached in the course of my thesis experiment, I invited listeners to complete an initial questionnaire.¹ In this questionnaire, my intention was to collect initial responses to specific questions in order to gather baseline data, thus enabling me to measure any change that took place during the course of the sermon series, as well as at the conclusion of the series.²

¹ See Appendix 7.

² Although all questions requested numeric response (for ease of recording), the surveys were all self-assessment surveys.

First, I wanted to determine from my congregational members and any others who would be listening to the sermons preached, their thinking on the subject of their core theological (spiritual) convictions. I wanted to know, at this point in their lives, and before they heard any of the sermons in *The Witness of Last Words & Legacy* series, how they would assess their own thinking about what was most important to them theologically. Did they have any sense of what their core spiritual values were? How deeply had my listeners thought through their personal theological convictions? And would this sermon series move them to think more seriously about them?

Next, I wanted to determine how deeply they had considered their own theological legacy – the important components of their faith they felt compelled to pass on to others. Had they thought through the values they cherished most, with respect to their faith? Did they adhere to any spiritual values so strongly that they felt compelled to share those values with others? Did they feel so strongly about their spiritual treasures that, if they neglected to pass them on to others, it would leave them feeling that their life was unfinished, incomplete, that they had somehow failed their life's purpose?

Finally, I invited those in attendance, before listening to the sermon that morning, to assess their own effectiveness in actually sharing their spiritual legacy with others. Had they started to do so? Had they made any progress toward their goal? Had they accomplished the task altogether? These same three questions were repeated in each of the surveys that followed each of the sermons in the series, so that this collected data could be used to measure any growth that took place from the beginning of the sermon series to the end. At the conclusion of each sermon in the series, listeners were invited to complete the survey that accompanied that morning's sermon. Each post-sermon survey,

in addition to having the three questions from the initial questionnaire, also included questions that invited listeners to assess how much they valued the six core convictions that were shared in the sermon series: faithfulness, gratitude, service, forgiveness, love and hope. Completed surveys were collected at the conclusion of each Sunday's service, and the data was entered into a spreadsheet.

My expectation was that each listener, after experiencing *The Witness of Last Words & Legacy* sermon series and hearing the Scriptural witness of the faithful who had preceded them and attempted to pass down these core theological convictions, would progress (as sermon listeners) in their theological thinking, come to cherish these specific values more deeply in their lives, consider more deeply their own desire to leave a spiritual legacy, and be moved by the witness they heard to do all they could to pass on these cherished values to those persons in their lives that mattered most to them. As they listened to the proclamation of the witness of these last words speeches, my hope was that every listener would indeed progress in each of these areas above.

Also as part of the thesis project I determined to take a detailed look into each of the sermons preached, in an attempt to give insight to the reader as to why I chose the passages I did and what I hoped to accomplish in the preaching of those passages. In the following chapter, *Analysis of Results*, I will explore the results obtained by means of sermon questionnaires and surveys received from those who listened and responded to the sermons.

God's Faithfulness – Sermon 1

The first and foundational core value I addressed was the faithfulness of God. Although I brought several last words passages into this sermon (as well as into every

sermon in this series), the primary last words text was one of the seven last words of Jesus from the cross, recorded in John 19:25-27, where Jesus demonstrated faithfulness to his Mother and to the Beloved Disciple, caring for their future well-being, even as he was reaching the end of his own earthly life.

In this first sermon in the series I spent a good amount of time introducing the subject matter of my thesis. I familiarized my listeners with the subject of cherished spiritual values in the characters of Scripture and their recorded witness (especially in their last words speeches). I invited my listeners to consider their own cherished theological values which had been passed down to them in and through the biblical witness, and I encouraged them to think about how determined they were to pass on their own theological treasures to the next generation.

Following introductory remarks, wherein I introduced my thesis, I invited the congregation to pray with me (a practiced format in my sermon delivery in this particular congregation). In the prayer itself, I reiterated some of the salient proposals I had made in my opening comments, giving thanks to God for the witness borne to us in Holy Scripture and asking that God would help us properly assess the witness made and guide us in our consideration of the value of this legacy that has been passed down to us, as well as how we might share this same legacy with those who follow after us.

I then introduced the subject of the first, foremost and foundational value: the faithfulness of God (and, in response to our faithful God, our faithfulness in return and our faithfulness demonstrated to others). In each of these core values, I also wanted to communicate that God (or Jesus) both initiates and exemplifies these values, that we learn them from him, and that we are called to pass on these values to others (that the

cherished faith might make its way down to successive generations). By way of introduction to the theme of faithfulness, I cited Lamentations 3:22-23, Hebrews 13:5 and Joshua 1:5-6, each of which speaks of the faithfulness of God.

Then I addressed my first chosen last words speech, the content of Joshua 24:1-13, which was also read in its entirety as the first lesson in our Sunday worship service. This text is the beginning of Joshua's final words to the Israelites. It is part of a covenant renewal ceremony that Joshua enacts, and this portion of the ceremony is what some have called a Historical Prologue.³ Joshua recounts the major events that have been experienced and then remembered by many successive generations of Jews, beginning with the promises God made to the patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. One of the major points Joshua makes (and what I sought to communicate in the sermon) is that God, acting in grace, carried through on promises made: God was (and is) faithful.

I then moved on to the apostle Paul's second (and last) letter to the church of God in Thessalonica,⁴ honing in on the verse, "But the Lord is faithful, and He will strengthen and protect you from the evil one" (2 Thessalonians 3:3). In this sermon, this was my second chosen "farewell speech." I was beginning my attempt to drive home the contention that those things that are most important to the speakers (writers) are being conveyed in their last words – and the faithfulness of God is one of them.

In preparation for the conclusion of the sermon, I referenced three instances of the faithfulness of Jesus: praying in the Garden of Gethsemane while the disciples slept,

³ I am indebted to Dr. Harry Wendt in his *Crossways Bible Study*, in which he points out the parallels between ancient Hittite treaties and the covenantal formula we find evidenced in the Old Testament, including Joshua's covenant renewal ceremony in Joshua 24.

⁴ 2 Thessalonians 3:1-5 was the selected passage for the second reading that morning.

reaching out to save Peter, while he was sinking in the Sea of Galilee (after his short-lived walking-on-water experience), and Jesus' reappearance one week after Easter evening, specifically for the once-absent, once-doubting, disciple Thomas. By sharing these incidents, I was building a case for the faithfulness of our Lord.

Then I focused on the sermon text: Jesus on the cross, speaking to his Mother and to the Beloved Disciple, caring for them in his last moments. Even as he suffered on the cross, he was, to the end, both a faithful son and a faithful friend. Jesus would neither abandon nor forsake his Mother nor the Beloved Disciple; he would care for them until his last breath. Indeed, in the last words Jesus spoke from the cross before his death we hear words of faithfulness.

I then connected the faithfulness Jesus demonstrated to these two beloved souls, in his matchmaking from the cross, with the faithfulness of God to us all. Specifically, I sought to stress the faithfulness of God to my listeners, that they might value that particular gift of grace in their own lives to such an extent that they would be intent to share it with others as long as they lived, and, if given the chance, to witness to God's faithfulness in the last words they would speak while alive.

In the conclusion I referenced the faith of Abraham,⁵ who, it is said, by the demonstration of his faith, gave glory to God.⁶

⁵ Romans 4:20-21

⁶God was glorified by Abraham because Abraham bore witness that God was trustworthy. By this action, Abraham was increasing God's reputation in the world. (This statement was influenced by Leith Anderson who wrote, "We glorify God by living in such a way that we enhance God's reputation in the world." Quoted in *Relevant and Timeless*, by Donald Burnett, 36, Xulon Press, 2011, www.xulonpress.com.) Abraham's actions influenced many who would hear of them, and they would serve to help observers grow in their own trust in the LORD, who demonstrated his faithfulness, time and time again.

Finally, I cited some of Paul's last words to Timothy, "Though we be faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself" (2 Timothy 2:13). Making reference again to some of Paul's last written words to Timothy,⁷ I encouraged listeners to respond to the faithfulness of God by living faithful lives and to consider how they might pass on this specific, cherished spiritual value to those who would follow after them.

At the conclusion of this first sermon (and for each of the five sermons that followed), listeners were invited to complete a short survey.⁸ In this survey (and in each of the five that followed), I again asked four of the same questions I had asked in the initial survey.⁹ In addition, I asked three questions that pertained specifically to that particular sermon.¹⁰

In an effort to complement listeners' consideration of the faithfulness of God as witnessed in Scripture, hymns were chosen in accordance with theme.¹¹

And so, in keeping with the theme of the faithfulness of God, and, in fact, introducing the theme (since it was the opening hymn), the congregation sang together

⁷ 2 Timothy 4:3-5

⁸ See an example in Appendix 8.

⁹ Questions 1,2,3 (see Appendix 7) from the initial survey were also asked in each of the successive surveys. The part of question 4 in the initial survey that aligned with the subject of each sermon was also asked in the survey specific to that sermon. For example, Question 4.b in initial survey (regarding God's faithfulness) was also asked in the survey given at the conclusion of the first sermon preached (whose subject was the faithfulness of God). The reason for this, of course, was to ascertain one indication of the effectiveness of the sermon on listeners' assessment of each particular spiritual value.

¹⁰ See Questions 4-6 in the surveys given at the conclusion of each sermon in the series, listed in Appendix 8.

¹¹ One can expect that the words (and even the music) of the hymns contributed to the evaluation of this particular spiritual value in the hearts and minds of listeners. However, I did not specifically ask in the any of the surveys what contribution any of hymns might have had, thinking it would be difficult for anyone to parse the value given for each spiritual value into individual components (how much of listeners' evaluation consists of hearing the actual text, how much is due to the preaching of the sermon, how much is due to the hymns that were selected and sung, etc.).

the epic hymn, *Great Is Thy Faithfulness*.¹² The words set the stage for the reading and the proclamation of the Word: “Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father, there is no shadow of turning with thee; thou changest not, thy compassions, they fail not; as thou hast been, thou forever wilt be.” Of course, this hymn is based on the words of the prophet Jeremiah, found in the center of his lament.¹³¹⁴

Moreover, in addition to *The Witness of Last Words & Legacy* sermon series, I also made arrangements for a local attorney to visit our church campus to make a presentation on wills and trusts.¹⁵ Doing so helped to keep the theme of legacy in the minds of my congregational members.¹⁶

In the midst of the sermon series a workshop was offered called, *Writing Your Own Obituary & Planning Your Own Funeral*,¹⁷ which I led.¹⁸

¹² Thomas Obediah Chisolm, “Great Is Thy Faithfulness,” hymnal.net, <https://www.hymnal.net/en/hymn/h/19>

¹³ See Lamentations 3:22-23.

¹⁴ Another hymn chosen for that Sunday to align with the theme is *How Firm a Foundation* (J. Rippon, “How Firm a Foundation,” hymnal.net, <https://www.hymnal.net/en/hymn/h/339>). The hymn speaks of God as refuge, God’s grace supplied in time of fiery trials, and of God’s “sov’ reign, eternal, unchangeable love.”

¹⁵ I am indebted to Dan Anderson, who made this suggestion in a conversation we had at Luther Seminary in the summer of 2019.

¹⁶ This presentation on wills and trusts may have influenced their thoughts about legacy and how they responded to questions on the final survey (especially for the twenty people who attended the wills and trusts presentation), but I did not specifically inquire in any of the surveys what weight this presentation might have played in their thoughts about their spiritual legacy.

¹⁷ Again, thank you to Dan Anderson for offering his counsel about offering this workshop to my members.

¹⁸ A dozen people attended this workshop (offered on two separate occasions), and the verbal feedback I received was positive. This, too, may have influenced the thoughts of legacy in those who attended. However, I did not specifically inquire in any of the surveys how attendees might have measured the influence this workshop had on their overall thoughts about their spiritual legacy.

The Legacy of Gratitude – Sermon 2

The second sermon in the series of *The Witness of Last Words & Legacy* focused on the theme of gratitude. The reason I chose this particular core value as the topic of the second sermon in the series is because I believe gratitude is an appropriate response to God and God’s faithfulness to us.

The gospel reading chosen to represent one of the “last words speeches” included in Scripture, occurs during Holy Week, when Jesus is in the home of Simon the Leper.¹⁹ Having more easily found last words speeches representing gratitude in other parts of Holy Scripture, it was more difficult to find one that was appropriate to the subject and that was also an example given by Jesus himself. Gratitude is not a characteristic we often attribute to God. Rather, gratitude is a character trait appropriate for any who recognize their connection with God or who have an interaction with the One who is “compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness.”²⁰ Gratitude is a characteristic that is appropriate for the created more than for the Creator.

In Jesus, however, the incarnate God walks and talks with created beings and experiences actions both good and evil toward his person. I chose this particular “last words speech” for several reasons.

First of all, I find it to be a very loving action on the part of Jesus, to welcome, with gratitude, what this unnamed woman does for him. Jesus truly sees this woman – not only her action but also her heart. He recognizes the good deed done, the sacrifice she has

¹⁹ The selected Gospel reading is from Matthew 26:6-13.

²⁰ This familiar refrain can be found throughout Scripture. See Psalm 103:8 as one example. I would also make mention of Jonah 4:2, where the prophet in no wise appreciates these attributes of God, working themselves out even to foreign nations, who were also enemies of God’s (and Jonah’s) people.

made, and he attributes to her action something that, in Jesus' particular case, could only have been done before his death – preparing his body for burial.

Secondly, Jesus is soon to leave his disciples. There is not a lot of teaching time left. And they still don't seem to “get” the heart of Jesus. They are indignant²¹ when they look upon this woman and her deeds in the home of Simon the Leper. Jesus alone defends both the woman and her actions. Jesus' defense of the woman's actions is completely consistent with the person Jesus has shown himself to be. No matter how humble or how small one is in the estimation of others, time and time again, Jesus values people as the beloved of God.

Finally, Jesus exalts this woman's deed. Wherever the gospel is preached, Jesus declares that this, too, shall be part of the Good News that is shared.²² What the woman had done was highly significant in the estimation of Christ, and it was his intention that her work be told as part of his own story. Did the apostles of our Lord – and the Church that came from them – follow through with this mandate of Jesus? One wonders how the Church might have acted differently throughout the centuries, if these words of Jesus had been taken more seriously.

The response of Jesus toward this woman can well be deemed gratitude. Jesus appreciated what she had done for him, and in so doing Jesus gave us an example to follow, to live lives of gratitude and appreciation, modeled for us by the Messiah of God.

²¹ Matthew 26:8

²² Matthew records Jesus saying, “Truly I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done shall also be spoken of in memory of her” (Matthew 26:13).

I began my second sermon in the *The Witness of Last Words & Legacy* series by defining the word gratitude and setting it before my listeners as the chosen spiritual value for the message that morning. I also mentioned early on that “gratitude is an appropriate response to the faithfulness of God.” In hearing this, listeners were reminded of the subject addressed the week prior, when the focus had been on faithfulness as the foundational spiritual value.

I then shared a personal story of an experience I had just the day before, in which I lifted up the theme of gratitude and gave the listeners a contemporary visual picture of an expression of appreciation, which I hoped would prepare them to hear the sermon centered on that subject. In addition, I again raised up the subject of legacy, and I invited my listeners to consider whether or not the man who expressed gratitude to me would not go on to share his story with others. I made mention of this to drive home one of my purposes in preaching this series, to encourage listeners not only to cherish these same spiritual values that have been passed down to us in last words of witness, but also to consider their own spiritual legacy – how they might pass on these treasured values to others.

After saying a prayer, I gave a quick introduction to the sermon series, reminding them that we were in the midst of looking at last words speeches and the reasons we were doing so. I then introduced our first “last words speaker for the day,” God’s servant Moses.

The particular passage selected for this witness of last words is recorded in Deuteronomy 26:1-11. After a forty-year journey through the wilderness, Moses, having led the Children of Israel (who were seemingly complaining most of the way), is

preparing this new generation of Hebrews to enter the Promised Land. These are some of the last words Moses speaks before he breathes his last and is buried at an unknown location in a valley in the land of Moab.²³ Moses makes it clear that this generation was going to be uniquely blessed as the generation that would inherit the promises made by God to their ancestors.

It is abundantly clear that Moses has come to the profound realization of the grace of God that has been poured out upon him in his life, and his heart was filled with gratitude. It was his desire that the people respond to God's grace in the same way he did – with thankful hearts. By doing so, Moses leaves behind a legacy of gratitude. One of my intentions in this sermon was to raise up this treasured spiritual value, along with the consideration of legacy, so that my listeners would recognize the legacy of gratitude that had been extended to them, and that they, in turn, might be challenged to pass it on to others.

In Moses' last words speech, he instructed the Children of Israel, once they had entered the Promised Land, to take some of the first fruits of their crops and offer them back to God as an act of gratitude and as an acknowledgement that God had richly provided for them. Moses seeks to instill in the people an attitude of gratitude, which is the proper demeanor of any who come into the presence of God.

This sermon speaks of the connection the new generation had to their ancestors, as they remembered God's faithful actions on their behalf. The Hebrew sense of *remembering* was much more than simple recollection. It was an understanding of their

²³ See Deuteronomy 34:5-6.

own participation in that same history.²⁴ It was an interpretation of those events as if they had experienced them personally. In this way, the faithfulness of God shown to their ancestors could also be reckoned as faithfulness to them. The new generation is also connected to their ancestors by receiving their legacy of gratitude and by their commitment to continue that legacy by teaching their children to order their lives in similar fashion, which included celebrating with the “the alien who is among you” and giving a tithe of their produce “to the stranger, to the orphans, and to the widow, that they may eat in your towns, and be satisfied” (Deuteronomy 26:11-12). They were to order their lives, as did their ancestors, in great part by showing gratitude through sharing their produce with the most vulnerable in their land.

The second biblical selection in this sermon is from the Letter to the Philippians.²⁵ In this epistle, one of the apostle Paul’s prison epistles, written near the close of his life,²⁶ he expressed deep gratitude for those living in Philippi who had come to faith in Jesus through his preaching ministry. As he does in many of his epistles written to churches, Paul begins his writing with a word of thanks.²⁷ Paul’s words of gratitude not only provide a backdrop and framework through which all of his following words would be interpreted. His example of gratitude fosters in his listeners an

²⁴ I am indebted to Dr. Harry Wendt for this insight.

²⁵ The second lesson for the morning’s worship was Philippians 1:3-11.

²⁶ While this letter is written in the tone of passing along guidance for living after the apostle has died, Paul does write in 1:24-27 and 2:24 that he hopes to visit the Philippian Christians again.

²⁷ Cf. Romans 1:8ff; 1 Corinthians 1:4-9; Colossians 1:3ff.; 1 Thessalonians 1:2ff.; 2 Thessalonians 1:3-4.

atmosphere of gratitude for their own faith community, and encourages them to pass on this legacy of gratitude to those who would follow in their steps.

Finally, in the main passage for the morning, the Scripture about Jesus and the unnamed woman who anointed his head as he reclined at the table in Simon's home was addressed. I referred to Jesus as our ultimate example. This gentle interaction of Jesus with this humble, adoring, passionate woman, is the impetus that moves Judas to betray Jesus. Thus, this is the last in-depth interaction of Jesus with outsiders recorded in Matthew, and some of the last words of teaching spoken from his lips, before his passion begins in earnest.

The woman anoints the anointed one. She christens the Christ. Her humble act is carried out with deep gratitude for the person of Jesus and for his ministry in the midst of the people. And Jesus receives her gift with words of deed gratitude.

In the sermon's summary statements, listeners were reminded of the gratitude shown by God's servant Moses, God's apostle Paul and God's Son Jesus. Listeners were encouraged to learn from their example and to consider the many ways they could pass on this legacy of gratitude to the next generation.

This second sermon, centering on the gratitude of God, was accompanied by hymns selected to align with the theme.²⁸ Worshippers sang strong words of gratitude

²⁸ We opened with *Rejoice, O Pilgrim Throng* (Edward H. Plumptre, "Rejoice, O Pilgrim Throng," hymnary.org, <https://hymnary.org/hymn/LSB2006/813>), which concludes with the rousing refrain, "Rejoice, give thanks, and sing!"

The hymn chosen to follow the sermon was *Now Thank We All Our God* (Martin Rinkart, "Now Thank We All Our God," hymnary.org, https://hymnary.org/text/now_thank_we_all_our_god). The hymn speaks of God, "Who wondrous things has done. / In whom his world rejoices; / Who, from our mothers' arms / Has blest us on our way / With countless gifts of love, / And still is ours today." Surely gratitude is an appropriate response to God's "countless gifts of love" bestowed upon creation.

The final hymn for the day, closing out the congregation's consideration of the theme of gratitude and thanksgiving, was *Let All Things Now Living* (Katherine Davis, "Let All Things Now Living," hymnary.org, https://hymnary.org/text/let_all_things_now_living_a_song_of_thank). It goes on to say, "A

such as “Rejoice, give thanks, and sing,” “Now thank we all our God” for God’s “countless gifts of love,” and “Let all things now living a song of thanksgiving to God the creator triumphantly raise.”

As an integral part of the morning’s worship experience, the hymns were selected with the hope that they might influence the thinking of listeners concerning the theme of gratitude. Through words of proclamation and hymns echoing the attitude of gratitude, my goal was for worshippers to appreciate this as a core spiritual value as they completed the survey following the Service of Worship.

Commitment, Dedication and Service – Sermon 3

The third sermon in the series spoke of the call of God to commitment, dedication and service. It began by immediately holding up the theme of commitment by quoting the familiar and often memorized words of Joshua: “As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD” (Joshua 24:15).

Joshua presents the people with a necessary choice as to whom they might serve. There are surprising indications that, like their ancestors in the days of their patriarch Abraham, who worshiped other gods,²⁹ they, too, had been worshipping other gods in

song of thanksgiving / To God the creator triumphantly raise. Who fashioned and made us, / Protected and stayed us, / Who still guides us on to the end of our days.” The hymn makes reference to “a pillar of fire shining forth in the night,” which connects well with Moses and the wilderness experience, the theme of remembrance (which was addressed in the sermon), and the theme of faithfulness (the core value from week one). The hymn concludes with the exhortation, “We too should be voicing / Our love and rejoicing; / With glad adoration a song let us raise / Till all things now living / Unite in thanksgiving: ‘To God in the highest, hosanna and praise!’” Gratitude is addressed as an appropriate response to God, who is creator, protector and guide.

²⁹ Joshua 24:2

Egypt.³⁰ The choice Joshua sets before them is extremely challenging: Will you serve the gods your ancestors worshipped before the LORD God called Abraham out of Ur? Will you continue to hold onto the gods you've secreted away since you left Egypt? Will you allow yourselves to be assimilated into this land and worship the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you have entered? Or will you serve the LORD? The words of the sermon, in recounting Joshua's last words speech, were, "What legacy will they choose to leave for those who would come after them?"³¹ The words of the sermon were stated this way to encourage my listeners to think about their own legacy. I raised up not just personal legacy but also the spiritual values that are cherished in the family to which each listener belongs.

Before Joshua sets these options in front of them, he takes his own stand, he makes his own commitment: "As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD." The people respond to Joshua's personal commitment and the challenge that followed by stating no less than four times that they, too, would serve the LORD.³² The sermon stated the difficulty of commitment – and that sometimes we don't follow through on the promises we make. Listeners were encouraged to persevere. After all, the saints who have gone before them had similar struggles in their own lives of faith. Even so, the hearers were challenged to declare their commitment to the one true God and were also challenged not to let their missteps keep them from rising up after a fall. They were urged to press on as dedicated, albeit humble, followers of the Lord.

³⁰ See Joshua 24:14.

³¹ See Appendix 3, below.

³² See Joshua 24:18,21,22,24.

Sermon number three in the series referenced a second witness of last words, spoken by the apostle Paul to the elders in Ephesus.³³ As did Joshua, so Paul reminded the elders of his own dedicated discipleship to Christ, and he openly stated his commitment to continue walking in the steps of Jesus. As he was leaving them, Paul entrusted the Ephesian elders to the Lord. Sermon listeners, in a similar fashion, were encouraged to entrust their children to the care of our gracious God. I was aware that there were many in our congregation who lamented the fact that their children do not presently attend church. Many have expressed to me that they felt they had not done an adequate job in passing the faith on to their children. They've shared their anxiety concerning the future faith status of their grandchildren (will they even be provided with an education in the faith?), and they have expressed concern over their children's (and grandchildren's) salvation. Paul, as recorded in Acts 20:32,³⁴ left present day followers of the Lord an example of how he entrusted those under his care into the good and gracious hands of God.

The gospel reading from John 21, the last words of Jesus to the apostle Peter, was chosen as another example of a last words speech. This text contains Jesus' own words about commitment, dedication and service.

Most listeners, no doubt, were well aware that three times Peter had denied Jesus.³⁵ And in John 21, when the resurrected Jesus appeared to Peter, he asked Peter

³³ Acts 20:17-38 was the text of the second reading for the morning.

³⁴ "And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32).

³⁵ See John 18:15-27.

three times, “Do you love me?”³⁶ The first two times Jesus asked the question, he used the word *agape*.³⁷ Peter responded with assent, but he used the word *phileo*.³⁸ The third time Jesus asked the question, he used the verb *phileo*.³⁹ Peter was saddened that Jesus did this. (Was Peter dismayed by the fact that Jesus had asked *three* times? Or was he grieved that Jesus had “come down to his level of ability” and had used *phileo* instead of *agape*? I am persuaded of the latter, and in the sermon, I related the passage in that way.⁴⁰)

What follows in the passage, however, was the central purpose I chose it as representative of last words speeches for the subject matter of commitment, dedication and service. Peter expressed concern about the Beloved Disciple, “Lord, what about this man?” (John 21:20-21). Jesus then answered in a way, as if to say, “What about him? What is that to you? Don’t be concerned about *him*; consider your *own* commitment to me.” Jesus responds simply, “You follow Me” (John 21:22).⁴¹

³⁶ See John 21:15-17.

³⁷ *Agape* is the Greek word for the highest form of love, God’s divine, perfect, sacrificial love for sinful humanity.

³⁸ *Phileo* is the Greek word for a lesser (than *agape*) form of love. It is the love of friendships; brotherly/sisterly love.

³⁹ Although some interpreters, including Raymond Brown and Karoline Lewis, point out that *agape* and *phileo* are used almost interchangeably throughout the gospel of John, I am persuaded, along with other recent interpreters, that, at least in this passage, a notable distinction is being made between them.

⁴⁰ “When we look to Jesus and his interactions with Simon Peter, we quickly remember Peter denying Jesus three times, and the parallel is not lost upon us when we hear Jesus ask Peter three times, ‘Do you love me.’ And three times Peter insists that he does.

Jesus knows the truth about Peter. He knows that the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. Peter does not claim too much. He admits that he is unable to love Jesus perfectly; the apostle has learned a hard lesson that any commitment he makes, as passionate as he makes it, must be tempered with humility.”

⁴¹ I then raised up before the congregation the personal call of our Lord. I mentioned a lyric from a song I remembered as a youth, “Though none go with me, still I will follow” (“I Have Decided to Follow Jesus,” words attributed to the Indian Christian missionary, Sadhu Sundar Singh.), which speaks to what Jesus asked Peter to do.

I also shared with my listeners a time when, in my own life, my youth director resigned. I experienced a personal crisis of faith. I came to realize that I had been living my faith *through* my youth director, and not *directly* before Jesus. Through this crucible, I emerged with a more mature faith in Christ. My renewed commitment was not dependent on the actions of another. I recognized that my call was *from* Jesus and my commitment was *to* Jesus.

The third sermon closed with a quotation from the apostle Paul’s words to the believers in Philippi, where he calls Christ “my Lord.”⁴² These words stress that it is indeed a personal call to commitment that Jesus makes on our lives.

Again, hymns were intentionally chosen to support the theme of commitment. The hymn following the sermon was *Take My Life, and Let It Be*.⁴³ After the title words are sung, the author continues with, “Consecrated, Lord, to thee; / Take my moments and my days; / Let them flow in ceaseless praise.” Then in the last verse comes the plea, “Take my love, my Lord, I pour / At thy feet its treasure store; / Take myself, and I will be, / Ever only, all for thee.” In this verse are also echoes of Matthew 26,⁴⁴ a passage discussed in the previous sermon, when an unnamed woman pours out costly perfume to anoint Jesus. The hymn as a whole, however, sings of wholehearted and complete dedication to the Lord’s service.

⁴² Philippians 3:8

⁴³ Frances Ridley Havergal, “Take My Life, and Let It Be,” hymnary.org, https://hymnary.org/text/take_my_life_and_let_it_be

⁴⁴ Matthew 26:6-13

The closing hymn was *Lead On, O King Eternal*⁴⁵ and its words [with] “deeds of love and mercy, the heavenly kingdom comes.”

Also connected to the theme of commitment was the Prayer of the Day,⁴⁶ which included the words, “that we may be wholly yours,” an expression of complete dedication to the Lord’s call upon our lives.

Forgiveness: The Legacy of Life – Sermon 4

The fourth sermon in *The Witness of Last Words & Legacy* series centered on the theme of forgiveness and focused, in part, on one of the seven last words of Jesus from the cross.⁴⁷

The opening words of the sermon spoke of a recent news report about Brandt Jean, the brother of Botham Jean, a man who had been shot and killed by his neighbor, Amber Guyger. What was not only newsworthy but controversial and scandalous is what Brandt had done during the courtroom proceedings: he extended forgiveness to Amber and, with the judge’s permission, embraced her. Botham’s father, Bertrum, also extended forgiveness, declared that he would pray for her, and said he hoped for healing to come to both his own family and to Amber. He did not seek retribution; rather, he sought reconciliation and forgiveness. His actions were aligned with the apostle Paul’s counsel, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21).

⁴⁵ Ernest W. Surtleff, “Lead On, O King Eternal, ” hymnary.org
https://hymnary.org/text/lead_on_o_king_eternal_the_day_of_march

⁴⁶ The prayer was taken under the heading SELF-DEDICATION from the *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1978), 47, prayer 203.

⁴⁷ Luke 23:34

Throughout the sermon these words were spoken as kind of a refrain, “If life is the greatest gift God has given us, forgiveness is the gift that sustains it.” Also in the sermon there were statements such as, “forgiveness is a gift of grace, a gift we receive from God.”⁴⁸ The parable of the unforgiving servant was also a part of this sermon with Jesus’ emphasis on forgiving others as one has been forgiven.⁴⁹

This fourth sermon in the series that spoke of the legacy of forgiveness related the words, “As David’s time to die drew near, he charged his son Solomon, saying, ‘I am going the way of all the earth.... keep the charge of the LORD your God, to walk in His ways.’” But then, David, who could speak of the experience of forgiveness (especially if Psalm 32 is indeed written by him), commanded his son not to let two of his enemies (Joab and Shimei) “go down to Sheol in peace....[but] bring [their] gray hair down to Sheol with blood” (1 Kings 2:1-12). David does not act in accordance with the forgiveness he has received. Rather, he breaks his promises and works to ensure that retribution against his enemies will be effected through his wise son, Solomon.

The sermon went on to compare David to the one called the Son of David – our Lord Jesus himself. Contrary to David’s last words of vengeance, Jesus pours out the grace of God from on high, as he speaks words of forgiveness from the cross. What makes this even more poignant is that Jesus does so in the absence of any confession, repentance or a plea for forgiveness.

In the sermon forgiveness was stressed as a crucial part of the legacy God has left us. The sermon hearers were urged to consider how well they, individually, were living

⁴⁸ Cf. Colossians 3:13 and 1 John 4:19.

⁴⁹ Matthew 18:23-35

out the legacy our Lord has left them and the importance of passing on that legacy to others.

The sermon concluded with a reference to Stephen and his last words as the first Christian martyr, spoken before he gave up his spirit and succumbed to death by stoning.⁵⁰ Stephen died uttering words very similar to those of his Lord. Stephen “called on *the Lord* and said, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!’ And falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them!’ And having said this, he fell asleep” (Acts 7:59-60). This bears witness to his own understanding of forgiveness, especially in light of his knowledge of Jesus’ words spoken from the Cross.

The sermon concluded by referencing again the Family Jean story. When asked what allowed him and his son to be so forgiving, Bertrum Jean reportedly said, “That’s what Christ would want us to do.”⁵¹

The hymns sung that day also reflected the theme of forgiveness, urging congregational singers to pass on the legacy of forgiveness by forgiving all who sinned against them.⁵²

⁵⁰ Acts 7:51-60 was the second reading for the day.

⁵¹ CNN interview, “The Problem with Always Asking Black People to Forgive,” Oct. 4, 2019, accessed on Feb. 17, 2020. https://m.cnn.com/en/article/h_50b830b29c95316ed9fe9940c381b9aa

⁵² The opening hymn chosen for the day was *Holy Spirit, Ever Dwelling*. (Timothy Rees, “Holy Spirit, Ever Dwelling,” hymnary.org https://hymnary.org/text/holy_spirit_ever_dwelling_in_the_holiest.) In the closing verse of the hymn we sang, “Holy Spirit, ever working / Through the Church’s ministry; / Quick’ning, strength’ning, and absolving, / Setting captive sinners free.” This set the stage for the entire worship experience, in which we focused on the grace and forgiveness extended to us in loving legacy.

The hymn of the day was *Today Your Mercy Calls Us*. (Oswald Allen, “Today Your Mercy Calls Us,” hymnary.org, <https://hymnary.org/hymn/LSB2006/915>.) In the opening verse we sang, “Today your mercy calls us / To wash away our sin, / However great our trespass, / Whatever we have been, / However long from mercy / Our hearts have turned away, / Your precious blood can wash us / And make us clean today.” The words not only reinforce the message of the day and the theme of forgiveness, but they declare the grace of forgiveness, that our forgiveness is not dependent on our response to it. (Still, my hope is that this forgiveness, given in grace, will itself work repentance in all its recipients, who will then allow the

Finally, the Prayer of the Day was chosen primarily because of the petition, “Inspire our witness to [Jesus] that all may know the power of his forgiveness...”⁵³

The Legacy of Likewise Love – Sermon 5

The penultimate sermon in *The Witness of Last Words & Legacy* series emphasized the theme of love. Love can be considered the chief and ultimate spiritual value, and there are many passages in the Scriptural canon that raise up this value. However, I was looking for last words speeches that brought out this esteemed value as something worthy of cherishing and passing on to others as a treasured legacy. I titled my sermon, “The Legacy of Likewise Love.”⁵⁴

After a brief introduction to the series (included for any first-time listeners, as well as another reminder to those had listened to previous sermons in the series) and

forgiveness to have its full effect on their hearts and, in faithfulness, pass on the legacy of forgiveness by forgiving all who have sinned against them.)

The closing hymn selected for the day was *Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee*. (Henry Van Dyke, “Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee,” [hymnary.org](https://hymnary.org/text/joyful_joyful_we_adore_thee), https://hymnary.org/text/joyful_joyful_we_adore_thee.) The closing verse of the hymn served as a capstone on the morning’s theme and the final trumpet blast for the sermon’s proclamation of forgiveness in Jesus Christ our Lord. The congregation sang to God, “Thou art giving and forgiving, / Ever blessing, ever blest, / Wellspring of the joy of living, / Ocean depth of happy rest! / Thou our Father, Christ our brother, / All who live in love are thine; / Teach us how to love each other, / Lift us to the joy divine.” This verse speaks not only of receiving the forgiveness of God; it encourages the worshipper to respond to God’s love and forgiveness by going forth and seeking to live in faithful response by loving and forgiving others.

⁵³ LBW, 46, prayer 192. The prayer, having included the “power of his forgiveness” not only anticipated the power of being forgiven, but the power of the forgiveness working in the human heart to enable its recipients to forgive those who have sinned against them. The prayer also prepared the congregation to listen to the words of Scripture, chosen especially to lift up forgiveness as a treasured spiritual value.

⁵⁴ See Appendix 5.

commenting on the theme of legacy, listeners were reminded of the subjects previously addressed: faithfulness, gratitude, commitment (dedication and service), and forgiveness.

The spiritual value under consideration that morning was the love of God and our love for others. I suggested that love might be considered the chief characteristic of God as Scripture declares, “Anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love” (1 John 4:8).

The sermon began with a consideration of the meaning of being created in the image of God.⁵⁵ Dr. Harry Wendt has taught that since God is love and always acts in love, to be created in God’s image means that we have been created by God to love God and to love neighbor.⁵⁶ This has Scriptural backing when Jesus speaks of the two great commandments of the law – to love God and to love neighbor.⁵⁷ These commandments, of course, were not original with Jesus,⁵⁸ but it has been surmised that Jesus was the first one to weld them together.⁵⁹ The way we show our love for God is by loving one another.⁶⁰ That God wills for all God’s children to get along is evidenced by Jesus’ prayer for unity in John 17.⁶¹

⁵⁵ Genesis 1:27

⁵⁶ See *Crossways Bible Study*, published by Crossways International, 2006. This teaching is in several resources, but see Crossways, Section 1: Units 1-10, H.N. Wendt, Unit 2: God’s Book – God’s Plan, Illustration 2C, 30-31.

⁵⁷ See Matthew 22:34-40.

⁵⁸ See Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and Leviticus 19:18.

⁵⁹ See Wendt, *Crossways Bible Study*.

⁶⁰ See Jesus’ teaching on the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31-46, where he says, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40, NIV).

⁶¹ See John 17:21-22.

The first of three last words speeches chosen for the day centered on the theme of love as a treasured spiritual value. The first text chosen is comprised of some of the final words of Moses, spoken to the new generation in the Book of Deuteronomy, as the children of Israel were perched on the plains of Moab on the east side of the Jordan River. In sharing these words, Moses prepares the people to enter the Promised Land.

The first passage chosen as a last words speech⁶² has already been cited above, as it relates to Jesus' response to the question, "Which is the great commandment in the law?" (Matthew 22:35). Indeed, there are twenty-eight chapters to go in the Book of Deuteronomy, and Moses speaks many more words after he speaks these. However, this passage qualified as an inclusion in the classification of last words speeches, since this passage is part of the final three addresses given by Moses, after which God shows him the Promised Land from the top of Mt. Nebo, he breathes his last, and is buried by God in a valley in the land of Moab.⁶³

Sermon listeners heard that this passage is central for the Jewish people and defines them not only as a Jewish people but as the people of God. In these words, they are told that if they are to live as God's people, they must value loving God above anything else that they do.

Moses continues by declaring to his listeners that they are to teach these things (a monotheistic faith, the importance of loving God with one's whole being) to their children. Moses thus encourages the children of Israel not only to incorporate this value

⁶² Deuteronomy 6:4-9

⁶³ Deuteronomy 34:1,5-6

in their own lives, he communicates that it is absolutely vital to pass it on to the next generation and to perpetuate their identity and living faith as the people of God.

With this “next generation talk,” the sermon moved into the next last words speech for the sermon: words from 2 John. John (or the community that wrote in his name) addressed the second generation of believers. The core teachings of the faith were being considered, questioned and challenged. In this discussion, the author focuses attention on love; indeed, love is prominent in the short writing (mentioned five times).⁶⁴ The writer declares that this is not a new command but one the faith community has had from the beginning. And that word *beginning* can be variously interpreted: it may be traced back to the beginning of their faith in Christ and his teachings; it may be considered the beginning of their identity as the people of God;⁶⁵ or it can indicate the very beginning, and refer all the way back to the Garden of Eden⁶⁶ and to the assertion that we have been created by a loving God for the express purpose of loving God, loving God’s creation, and loving each other.

This doctrine of love as a central spiritual value is at the heart and core of the Christian faith. The sermon stated it this way: “Without love, one would not have what we call the Christian faith.”⁶⁷

⁶⁴ 2 John 1,3,5,6 (twice)

⁶⁵ I.e., Deuteronomy 6:4-9

⁶⁶ Genesis 1:27

⁶⁷ See Appendix 5.

The central last words speech of the sermon was the words of Jesus shared in the upper room the night before his death.⁶⁸ That Jesus is said to have come forth from God and was returning to God expresses his divinity and that what he is about to do would be a radical, divinely sanctioned act. Jesus took the form of a servant and began to wash his disciples' feet.⁶⁹

John tells us that what Jesus did for his disciples was an expression of the fullness of his love for them.⁷⁰ Thus, in allowing Jesus to wash their feet, they were recipients of his legacy of love. Jesus then teaches them to pass on this legacy of love: "If I, then, the Lord and the Teacher washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example, that you also should do as I did to you" (John 13:14-15).

Later in the chapter, Jesus gives them a new commandment: "Love one another, as I have loved you" (John 13:34). Jesus emphatically tells them that this would be the identifying mark of his disciples – when they showed this kind of loving service (the humble, loving service of Jesus) for one another.

I then mentioned in the sermon that just as forgiveness received does not necessarily mean we will extend that same forgiveness to others, but that having received forgiveness we are also given the command in Ephesians 4:32 to forgive one another as God in Christ has forgiven you, so, too, with the gift of love: "Love one another as I have

⁶⁸ The gospel reading chosen for the day was John 13:1-17.

⁶⁹ I made mention in the sermon of the disciples' bewilderment at what Jesus was doing and of the initial refusal of Peter. However, when Peter changes his mind (in the very next verse!), I drew attention to the portrayal of Peter as a disciple who wanted all of what Jesus had to offer ["Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head" (John 13:9).] I mentioned this because Peter's action correlates with the earlier last words speech, when Moses taught the commandment to love God with one's whole heart.

⁷⁰ John 13:1 (NIV)

loved you” (John 15:12). Having receiving the gift of love, we are opened up to the possibility – indeed commanded – to extend that love to others. We have been given the possibility (some would say the power) to pass on the legacy of love. Of course, having received the love of Christ does not guarantee that all will go forth to do likewise. Judas was mentioned in the sermon as an example of one who did not respond to Jesus’ radical servant love in a similar fashion. Jesus washed his feet, too. But “Satan then entered into him” (John 13:27), and he left the fellowship of Jesus and the other disciples and moved forth with his betrayal of Jesus.

Jesus tells his disciples, “Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them” (John 13:17). I also quoted from 1 John 3:18, “Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.” Jesus loves us and then calls us to go forth and love with a “likewise love.”

“Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). Jesus does this for us most extremely on the Cross of Calvary. And he calls us, as his followers, to lay down our lives in loving service to one another and to extend his legacy of love.

The hymns chosen for the Sunday this sermon was preached were chosen with the theme in mind, to prepare the people to hear the Word (the opening hymn), to reinforce it (post-sermon hymn) and (with the closing hymn) to send them off with the theme ringing in their ears and resounding throughout their being.⁷¹

⁷¹ The opening hymn selected was *Sing to the Lord of Harvest*. (John S.B. Monsell, “Sing to the Lord of Harvest,” hymnary.org, https://hymnary.org/text/sing_to_the_lord_of_harvest.) The sermon was preached the week before Thanksgiving, so the hymn fit with the season. But even more, we sang in the opening verse, “Sing to the Lord of harvest, / Sing songs of love and praise.... Sing to the Lord of harvest / A joyous song of love.” In the final verse, we sang the song of those who respond to having received the love of God: “Bring to this sacred altar / The gifts his goodness gave, / The golden sheaves of harvest, / The

The hymn of the day (post-sermon hymn) was *Lord, Speak to Us, that We may Speak*.⁷² The hymn is a hymn of reception and response; in it singers prayerfully request that God would grant them something, so that they, in turn, might extend what they have received to others. Thus, this is a hymn that may well be called a hymn of legacy. In the closing verse the congregation sang, “Oh, fill us with your fullness, Lord, / Until our very hearts o’erflow / In kindling thought and glowing word, / Your love to tell, your praise to show.”

Our closing hymn for the day was one of the great hymns of Charles Wesley, *Love Divine, All Loves Excelling*.⁷³ The congregational participants’ final thoughts centered on God’s love for them, poured out in and through Jesus Christ our Lord. Those gathered in worship sang, “Joy of heav’n, to earth come down!... Jesus, thou art all compassion, / Pure, unbounded love thou art.” In the third verse the congregation sang, “Thee we would be always blessing, / Serve thee as thy hosts above, / Pray, and praise thee without ceasing, / Glory in thy perfect love.” And in the final verse all joined together to sing, “Till we cast our crowns before thee, / Lost in wonder, love and praise!” The hymn speaks of God’s love extended to us, as well as our responsive love – shown to God and toward each other.

The Prayer of the Day was also chosen to reinforce the theme of love.⁷⁴

souls Christ died to save. / Your hearts lay down before him / When at his feet you fall. / And with your lives adore him / Who gave his life for all.”

⁷² Frances Ridley Havergal, “Lord, Speak to Us, that We May Speak,” hymnary.org, https://hymnary.org/text/lord_speak_to_me_that_i_may_speak

⁷³ Charles Wesley, “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling” hymnary.org, https://hymnary.org/text/love_divine_all_love_excelling_joy_of_he

⁷⁴ Although I preached this sermon at the end of the season of Pentecost, I found a prayer listed under SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY that corresponded with the theme I was trying to

Legacy: Our Confident Hope – Sermon 6

In the final sermon in *The Witness of Last Words & Legacy* series, the focus was on the spiritual value of hope.⁷⁵

As a prelude to the theme of hope, the words of First Peter were declared. “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a **living hope** through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3, NIV, emphasis mine). The sermon introduction also included a summary of the road we had already traveled in the previous five sermons in the series, with an explanation how in last words speeches the heart and soul of a person can be expressed as they sift through their accumulation of knowledge and life experiences. At this point, hearers were reminded of the theme of legacy: having received cherished spiritual values, persons near the end of their lives can share those values with those who will live on in this life.

Immediately before the start of the sermon I offered a prayer that centered on the theme of hope, acknowledging the real possibility that some listeners had come to church with great hope in the promises of God, while there might be other listeners in the gathering who had all but lost their hope. I prayed that God would grant us a sure and

accentuate in the service: “God of compassion, keep before us the love you have revealed in your Son; in our words and deeds help us to be like him through whom we pray, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.” (*Lutheran Book of Worship*, 16, prayer 18. Note: I removed the phrase (after “revealed in your Son”) “who prayed even for his enemies.” I thought that if I were to include that phrase it would have drawn attention to the “love of enemies,” and, although certainly part of Christ’s mandate (Matthew 5:44), it was not the focus of this particular sermon and would have unnecessarily complicated what I intended to communicate, if it did not serve as a distraction. Implicit in this prayer is the understanding of legacy: what we have we received, we in turn pass on to others.

⁷⁵ This might be considered our last or final spiritual value, that which we cherish as we draw our final breaths in this life here on Earth and anticipate the promises made to us of eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord.

certain hope, centered in God and the promises God has given us in Jesus Christ our Lord.

The sermon itself began with the assertion that the most important aspect of our hope is the ground of our hope, i.e., upon **what** our hope is based, or in **whom** our hope is placed. As a preacher, I wanted to differentiate between real hope (hope that is well founded) and empty hope (that which is merely wishful longing). The intent of these words was to communicate that true hope is found in God and in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Ezekiel 47:1-12, the first of the three last words speeches for this sermon, was chosen for the final sermon in the series. Ezekiel was a prophet to a hopeless people living in exile in Babylon. They had experienced things in their lives they never thought they would experience. The worst had happened. They lost their homes, their temple, their nation, their land. They were exiles, people without a home, refugees. They now feared they would never return to their homeland and had all but given up hope. After addressing the *Sitz im Leben* of the people in Ezekiel's day, the sermon went straight to the most famous passage in Ezekiel, the vision the prophet is given of a valley filled with dry bones.⁷⁶

In a striking visual, God gives the prophet a picture of the people of Israel, who declared that they were a people whose "bones are dried up," and whose "hope has perished." They lamented: "We are completely cut off" (Ezekiel 37:11).

As their pastor I knew there were some in the congregation who had experienced similar despair, those whose lives had not turned out as they had expected. They had not anticipated the loss of their job, the death of people they cared for, their inability to

⁷⁶ Ezekiel 37:1-14

conceive and have children of their own. Even if these occurrences happened a long time ago, I sensed they were nonetheless still strangely connected to them. The aim of the sermon was not simply to complete a series of last words of witness, but mainly to be a means to give listeners real hope. In this way it was hoped they would sense a powerful and ultimate reason to treasure these spiritual values and pass them on in living legacy to the generations that follow after them.

“Can these bones live?” God had asked the prophet.⁷⁷ The answer is surely and absolutely no. These bones are lifeless. But Ezekiel leaves the answer up to God. He knows that with God, all things are possible. It is important for the preacher to assist sermon listeners in looking to God (like the prophet did, and like he encouraged the people in his day to do) when it appears that all hope is lost.

The sermon related the remainder of this vision to listeners and then stated that, as if in echo to this vision in chapter 37, Ezekiel has another vision in chapter 47, the first last words speech for the day.

In this vision (one of the last visions Ezekiel is given), he sees water flowing from the temple of God. This water is life-giving, fruitful and brimming with health. It is a vision of hope, to be sure. And in sharing these written words of his vision, some of the last Ezekiel contributes to the people in his day, the prophet leaves a legacy of hope.

⁷⁷ Ezekiel 37:3

The next reading selected for the day to represent the legacy of hope was from the last chapter of the Bible,⁷⁸ some of the last written words of John as he relates the visions he received on the island of Patmos.⁷⁹

The setting in Revelation is similar to the setting in Ezekiel's day. Both generations were challenged with the temptation to give up the fight; both generations were in danger of losing all hope for their future existence and well-being. The apostle encouraged the people to hold on, to stand firm in the faith, and he assured them of their victory in Jesus Christ, that they would overcome in and through the Lamb of God who sits on the throne.⁸⁰ To communicate this good news of hope, John recounted his heavenly vision of a river flowing from the throne of God. The river flows with life-giving water; everyone who comes near it, everyone who touches it, receives life and healing. Their hope is surely not gone. In fact, their hope is certain in Jesus Christ their Lord.⁸¹

The sermon then urged the people to hear the comforting words of Jesus spoken to his disciples⁸² just before he went to the cross to give his life for the sins of the world.

⁷⁸ Revelation 22:1-6a

⁷⁹ Revelation 1:9

⁸⁰ See Revelation 7:17.

⁸¹ I then drew a parallel to the modern world. Surely hopelessness was not relegated just to the people in biblical times. I related (in a general way) a conversation I had recently had with a woman who expressed feelings of anxiety, depression and who had all but given up hope. The longing for good news that is truly good, of hope that will not disappoint – this longing is pronounced in our world today, just as much as it was in the days of the prophet Ezekiel or the apostle John.

⁸² The gospel lesson chosen for my final last words speech on the subject of hope was John 14:1-3.

Jesus spoke these words of comfort with authority, for he is the Eternal One who was with God at the beginning.⁸³ The hope we find in Jesus is a certain hope – not only eternal life to come when we breathe our last, but living hope, present with God’s people even now. This is the message I sought to convey to my listeners. In the words of the sermon, “Jesus comes to give us new lenses.... through which to view the hardships of this life.”⁸⁴

The sermon concluded with some of the apostle Paul’s last words to the Christians in Rome, “May the *God of hope* fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may *abound in hope* by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Romans 15:13, emphasis mine). I then concluded by reaffirming these last words of witness as a treasured legacy that has been passed down to us – a legacy that, rightly received, we will pass on to those who will follow after us. I reiterated the cherished values: God’s faithfulness, gratitude, commitment to dedicated service, forgiveness, love and hope.⁸⁵

The hymns chosen for the day affirmed the treasured spiritual value of hope. The opening hymn was *My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less*.⁸⁶ The congregation sang, “My hope is built on nothing less / Than Jesus’ blood and righteousness; / No merit of my own I claim, / But wholly lean on Jesus’ name.” This is a confession of confidence and a hope

⁸³ John 1:2

⁸⁴ See Appendix 6, “Legacy: Our Confident Hope.”

⁸⁵ I then concluded in prayer, thanking God for the legacy of spiritual values we have received from the last words of witness recorded in Holy Scripture. And I prayed that we would consider well these cherished values and do our very best to pass on this legacy as a spiritual treasure for the generations to come.

⁸⁶ Edward Mote, “My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less,” hymnary.org, https://hymnary.org/text/my_hope_is_built_on_nothing_less

for our salvation that we place solely in the righteousness of Christ. This doctrinal statement is thoroughly Christian⁸⁷ and is at the very heart of our Lutheran convictions.

The post-sermon hymn was selected primarily for the season (Christ the King Sunday): *All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name!*⁸⁸ The lyrics also included words of hope centered in Jesus. "O seed of Israel's chosen race / Now ransomed from the fall, / Hail him who saves you by his grace / And crown him Lord of all."

Our closing hymn for the day was *Guide Me Ever, Great Redeemer*.⁸⁹ The hymn speaks of God as the Redeemer, Provider, Deliverer and Protector.⁹⁰

The Prayer of the Day was also specifically chosen for this service centering on hope.⁹¹ "Lord God, we ask you to keep your family, the Church, always faithful to you, that all who lean on the hope of your promises may gain strength from the power of your love; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

In preaching this series, *The Witness of Last Words & Legacy*, my intent was to raise up before my listeners core spiritual values that might be gleaned from the chosen Scriptures that speak of faithfulness, gratitude, commitment, forgiveness, love and hope.

⁸⁷ See Galatians 2:16.

⁸⁸ Edward Perronet, "All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name!" hymnary.org, https://hymnary.org/text/all_hail_the_power_of_jesus_name_let

⁸⁹ William Williams, "Guide Me Ever, Great Redeemer," hymnary.org, https://hymnary.org/text/guide_me_o_thou_great_jehovah

⁹⁰ "Guide me ever, great Redeemer, / Pilgrim through this barren land. / I am weak, but you are mighty; / Hold me with your pow'ful hand. / Bread of heaven, bread of heaven, / Feed me now and evermore." In the closing verse the eternal hope of heaven is couched in biblical language centering on the entrance into the earthly and temporal Promised Land: "When I tread the verge of Jordan, / Bid my anxious fear subside; / Death of death and hell's destruction, / Land me safe on Canaan's side. / Songs and praises, songs and praises, / I will raise forevermore."

⁹¹ *Lutheran Book of Worship*, 16, prayer 17.

Moreover, my hope was that listeners would recognize them as a treasured spiritual legacy that had been passed down to them, that they might learn to cherish these spiritual values as well, and, in turn, pass them on to the generations that follow in their steps. If these purposes were served, the project will continue to strengthen faith in the Body of Christ (the Church) and, to a small degree, our cherished Christian faith will be perpetuated.

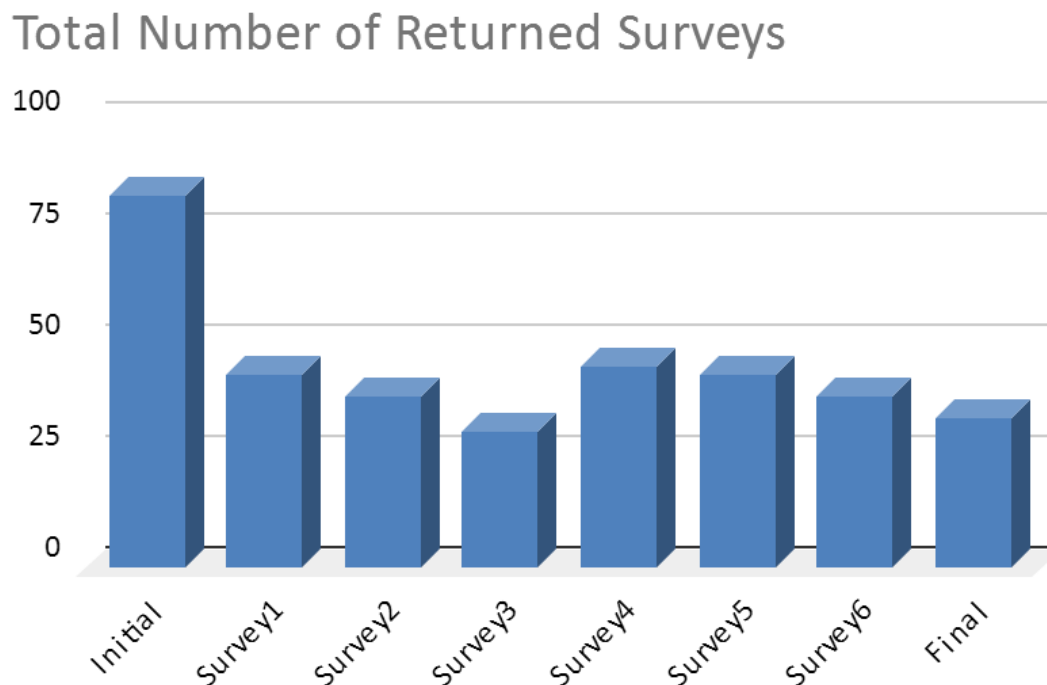
Were these goals achieved? Were the sermons I preached effective in bringing about these desired ends? Did the questionnaires prior to and following the series, plus the surveys received after each sermon indicate growth in understanding the challenge of speaking faith-filled words, particularly towards the end of one's life? And did the surveys reveal a desire to leave a legacy of deep faith for others who live on after them? That is the subject of my next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

Before would-be listeners heard one preached sermon in this series, *The Witness of Last Words & Legacy*, I requested that they complete an initial questionnaire. The purpose of doing so was to gather preliminary, baseline information, which I could later compare to additional surveys completed by listeners after the conclusion of each sermon as well as to a final questionnaire given at the end of the sermon series. The initial opportunity to complete the initial questionnaire was given before the preaching of the first sermon. However, since there were many who missed the first sermon (indeed, there were some who missed the first few or several), and because I wanted to include their input for this project, during the morning announcements on the occasion of each of the successive sermons, listeners were invited to complete the initial questionnaire, if they had not already done so, before hearing that morning's sermon.

In this way I hoped to gather initial questionnaires from anyone who listened to at least one of the sermons in the series. Figure 1 shows the number of surveys collected. It is clear that the number of initial questionnaires collected (N = 83) far exceeded any other surveys collected for any of the sermons preached in the series. (Indeed, apart from the initial questionnaire, the number of surveys received from sermon #4 was the next most received (N = 45), just over half of the number received in the initial questionnaire.)

Figure 1: Number of Surveys Returned

In Figure 2, the gender of those who completed at least one survey is displayed. There were 58 who identified as female, 44 who identified as male, and 23 who did not indicate a gender. The male/female representation is consistent with the demographics of our worshipping community. Of course, there may also be a gender difference in those who are unwilling to participate in any survey whatsoever. Although I doubt this played any role in my project, if this was indeed a factor in the surveys I requested, I could not determine its level of influence.

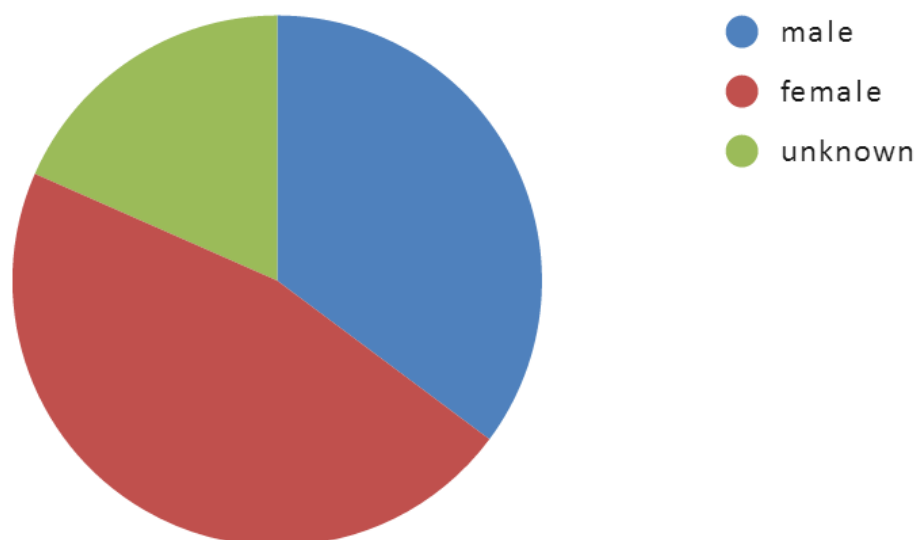
Of the six sermons I preached, the average number of sermons attended (and for which a survey was received) was 2.38. However, there were 42 people for whom I collected only one survey. Throughout the successive surveys, I traced data that would help me determine the effectiveness of the sermons preached in the series to influence

listeners' progression in three areas: their thinking concerning their core theological convictions, their consideration of the personal spiritual legacy they hoped to pass on, and listeners' effectiveness in sharing their theological legacy. These three areas will be

Figure 2: Gender of Respondents

Breakdown by Gender

125 individual respondents



explained in the figures and tables that follow. Those from whom I received only a few surveys were not included in any of the progression results, since I had too few data points, and no progression could therefore be determined. There were sixteen people who completed surveys for two sermons in the series; seventeen who completed surveys for three sermons; sixteen who completed surveys for four sermons; eight who completed surveys for five sermons; and only one who was present for all six sermons and completed a survey for each.

For those who listened to at least two sermons (and completed surveys), the average sermons listened to was 3.3.

The first question on the initial questionnaire was, “On a scale of 1-10, how thoroughly have you thought through your own core theological convictions (the aspects of your faith you value most)?” Of the 83 people who responded to this question on the initial questionnaire, the average self-assessment for this question was 7.52. Of the 25 people who completed both an initial and final questionnaire (and could be tracked for progression on this question), the average group self-assessment for this question went from 7.76 to 8.4.

Data for respondents who listened to at least three sermons (and completed surveys) was evaluated individually, from the initial questionnaire, to the sermon surveys completed, to the final questionnaire. The results are shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Progression of Listeners’ Theological Convictions

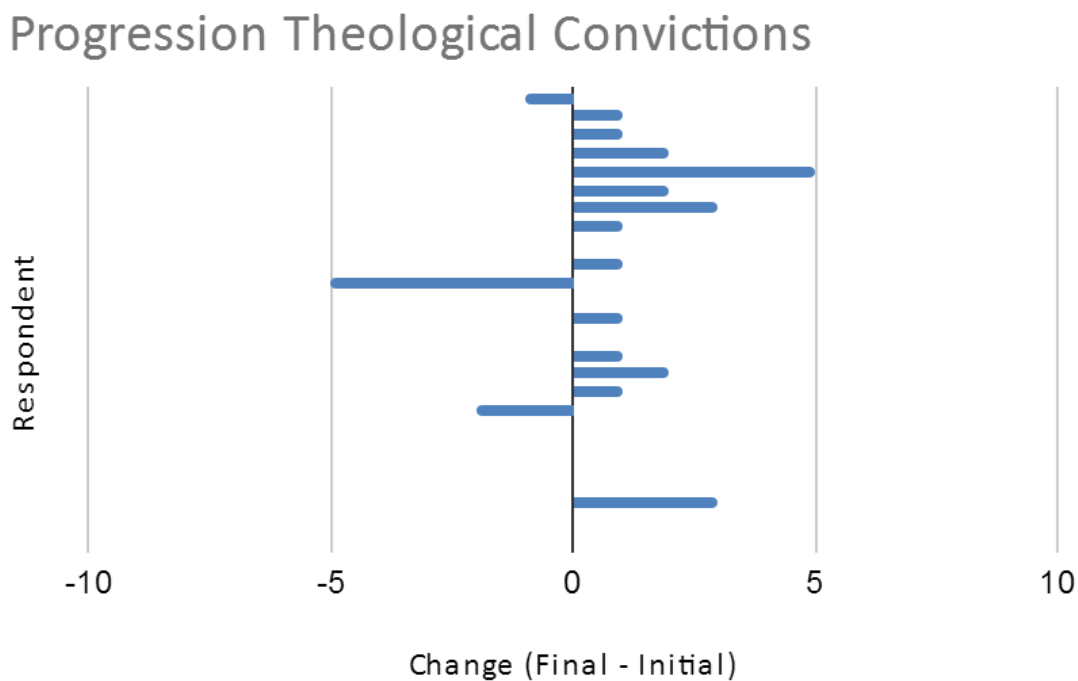
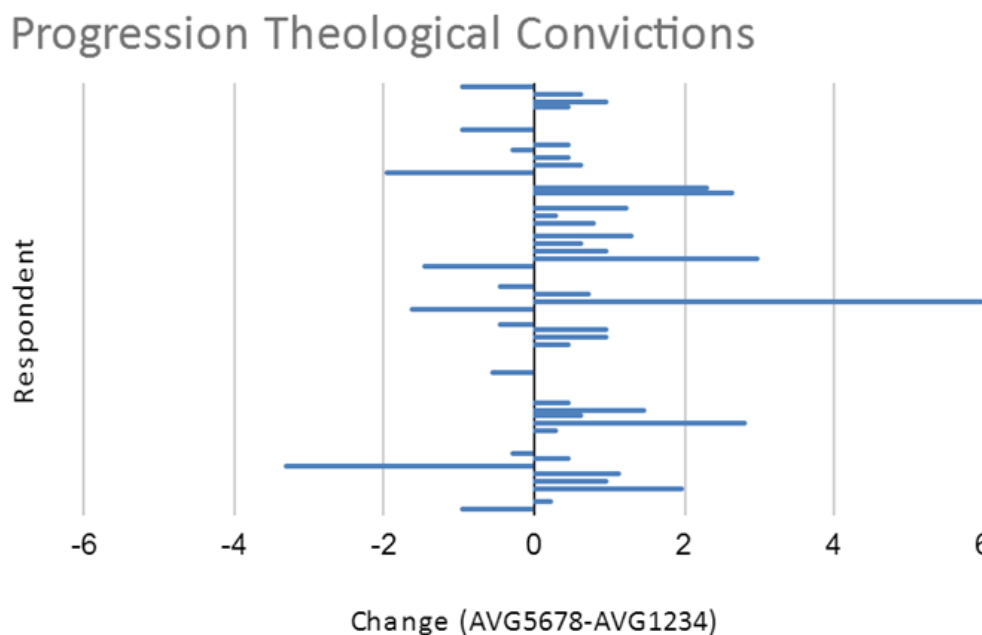


Figure 3 shows the delta between final and initial questionnaires, with positive deltas showing toward the right and negative deltas to the left. For example, if in the initial questionnaire, a listener reported 8 and in the final questionnaire the listener reported 10, the delta would be +2 and charted two toward the right. (Or, if a listener reported 3 in the initial questionnaire and 5 in the final questionnaire, this, too, would be +2 delta and charted two toward the right.) Alternatively, if a listener reported 10 in the initial questionnaire and 8 in the final questionnaire, the delta would be -2 and charted two toward the left. (Or, if a listener reported 5 in the initial questionnaire and 3 in the final questionnaire, this, too, would be a -2 delta and charted two toward the left.) If a listener reported 8 on both the initial and final questionnaires, it would indicate zero, neither positive nor negative, and is shown in the chart as a gap. The results show that this sermon series did appear to be effective for those who were present to hear at least three sermons in the series, as far as their self-assessment of thinking through their own theological convictions (core values).

Figure 4 illustrates in greater depth the question regarding the progression of theological convictions. It shows the progression from Initial to Final Questionnaire, looking at the delta between the average of the first four surveys (1234) and the last four surveys (5678). This illustration takes into account more reports and subsumes more data.

The second question asked on the initial questionnaire was, “On a scale of 1-10, how thoroughly have you thought through the theological legacy you would like to leave?” Of the 25 people who completed both an initial and final questionnaire (and could be tracked for progression on this question), the average group self-assessment for this question went from 6.74 to 7.92.

Figure 4: Average Progression of Listeners' Theological Convictions



Data for respondents who listened to at least three sermons (and completed surveys) was evaluated individually, from the initial questionnaire, to the sermon surveys completed, to the final questionnaire. The results are shown in Figure 5.

The results in Figure 5 show that this sermon series did appear to be effective for those who were present to hear at least three sermons in the series, as far as their self-assessment of their thinking about the theological legacy they would like to pass on to the generations that follow.

Figure 6 illustrates in greater depth the question of the progression of theological legacy. It shows the progression from Initial to Final Questionnaire, looking at the delta between the average of the first four surveys (1234) and the last four surveys (5678). This illustration takes into account more reports and subsumes more data.

The third question asked on the initial questionnaire was, “On a scale of 1-10, how satisfied are you in your effectiveness of having shared your theological legacy?” Of

Figure 5: Progression of Listeners' Theological Legacy

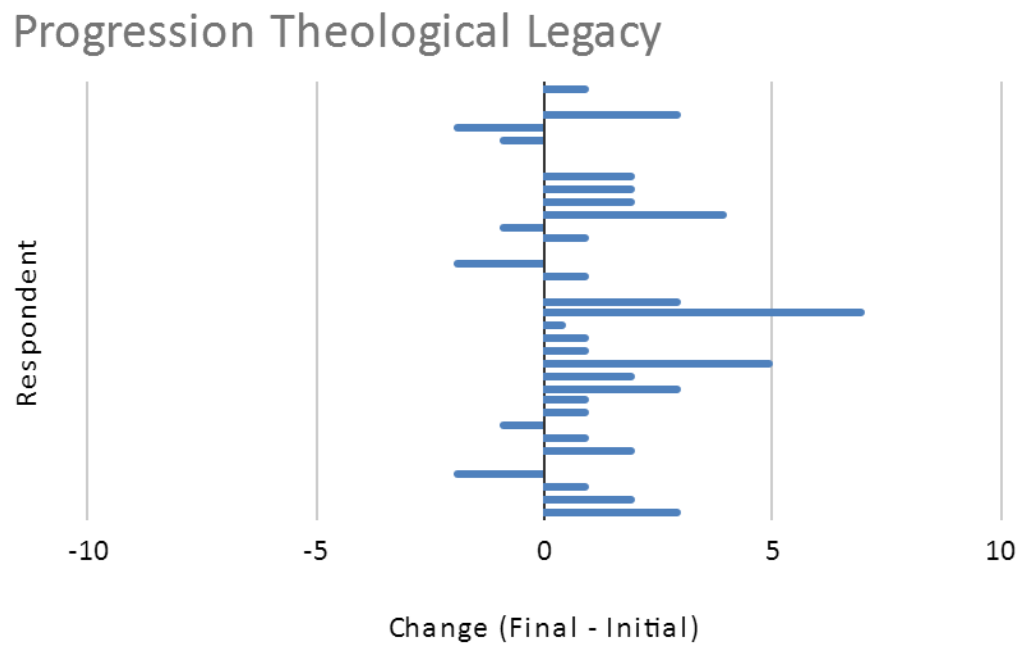
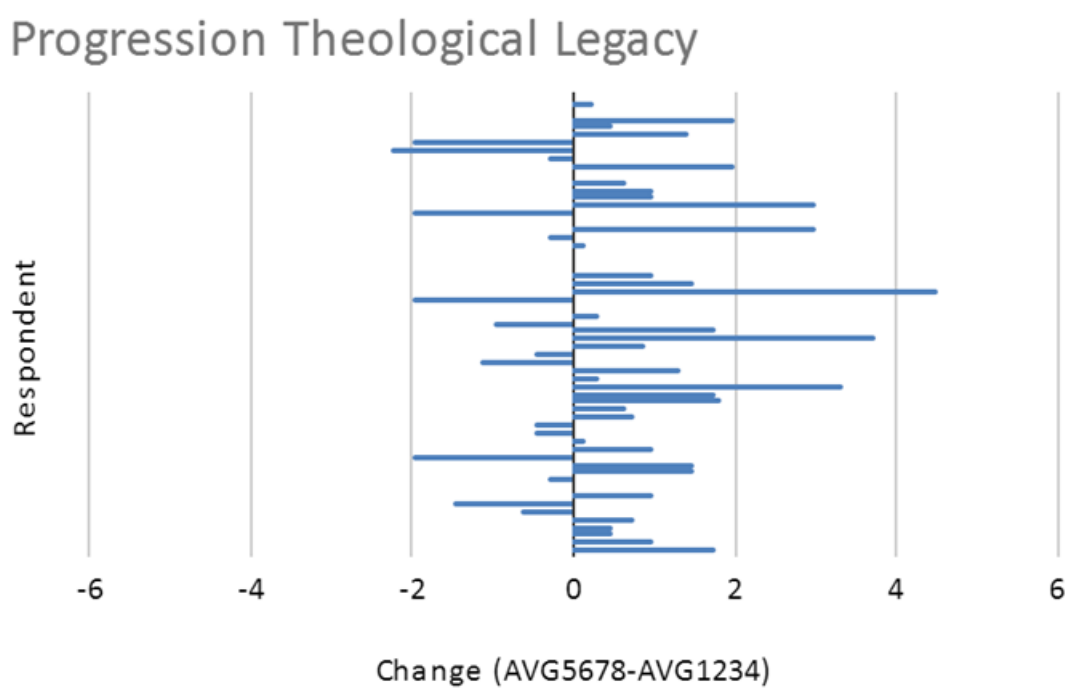


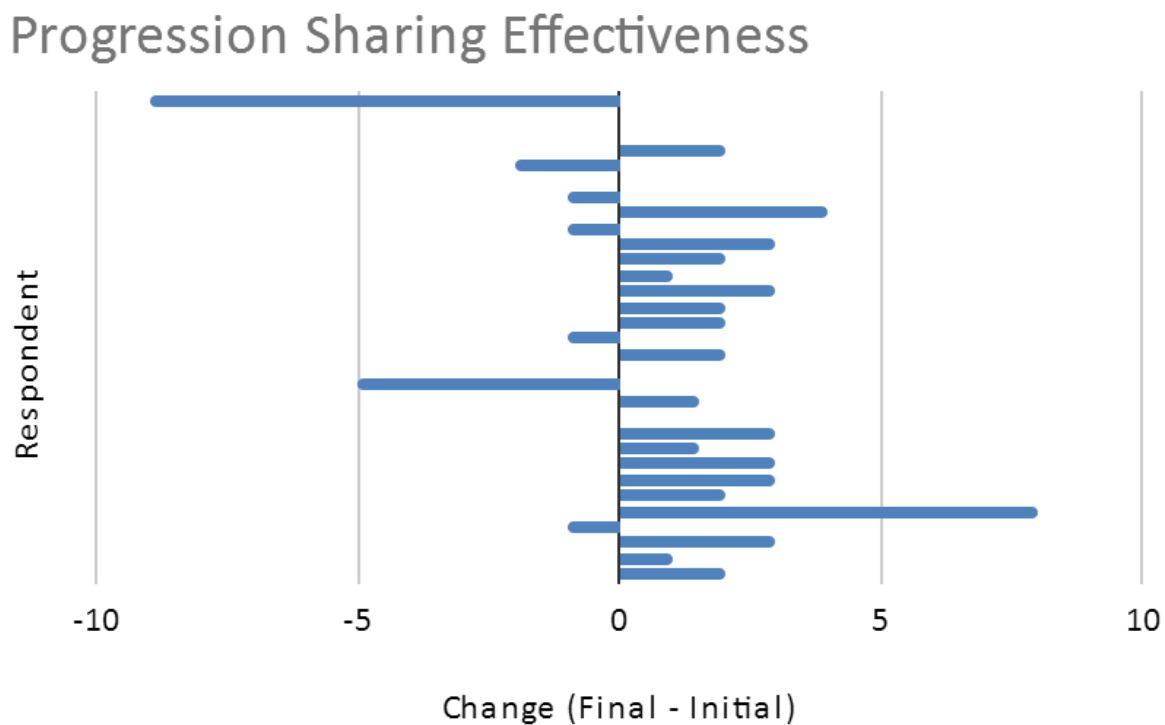
Figure 6: Average Progression of Listeners' Theological Legacy



the 83 people who responded to this question on the initial questionnaire, the average self-assessment for this question was 5.63. Of the 24 people who completed both an initial and final questionnaire (and could be tracked for progression on this question), the average group self-assessment for this question went from 5.73 to 6.90.

Data for respondents who listened to at least three sermons (and completed surveys) was evaluated individually, from the initial questionnaire, to the sermon surveys completed, to the final questionnaire. The results are shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Progression of the Effectiveness of Listeners' Shared Legacy



The results in Figure 7 show that this sermon series did appear to be effective for those who were present to hear at least three sermons in the series, as far as their self-

assessment of their satisfaction concerning the effectiveness of sharing their own theological legacy.

Figure 8 illustrates in greater depth the question of the progression of listeners' self-assessment about the effectiveness of sharing their theological legacy.

Figure 8: Average Progression of the Effectiveness of Listeners' Shared Legacy

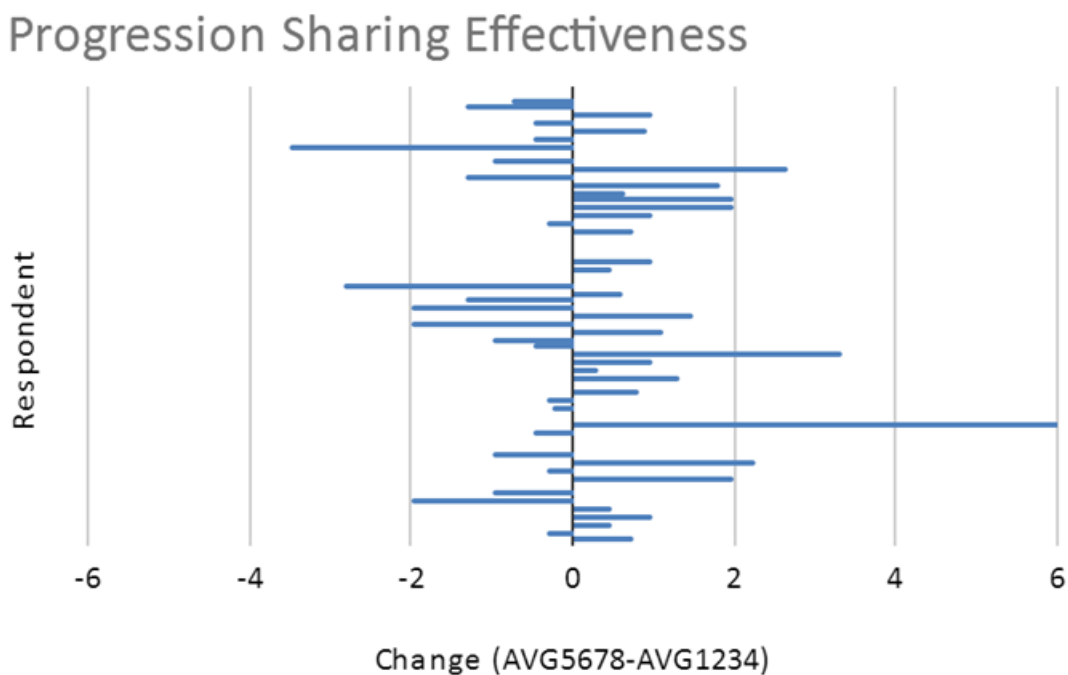


Figure 8 shows the progression from Initial to Final Questionnaire, looking at the delta between the average of the first four surveys (1234) and the last four surveys (5678). This illustration takes into account more reports and subsumes more data.

Before starting the sermon series, I wondered how listeners would assess the spiritual values I had identified in the last words speeches before they heard me

preach a sermon that included those spiritual values, given as a part of the speaker’s legacy. In the initial survey, I asked, “How much do you value *** (where *** represents the items in Column A of Table 1) with respect to your thinking about your theological legacy?” Respondents were to rate each value on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 10 (highest value). See Table 1 for survey results.

Table 1: Initial Assessment of Spiritual Values

Column A	N	Value
God’s Faithfulness (to you and to all creation)	81	8.47
Gratitude (for all that God has done)	83	8.96
Dedication & Service (commitment to follow in Jesus’ steps)	84	7.92
Forgiveness (receiving forgiveness from God and forgiving others)	84	8.52
Love (received from God and extended to others)	84	8.71
Hope (for this life and confidence in God’s eternal promises)	84	8.38

Another question I had: Did listeners report increasing the importance they placed on a spiritual value after hearing a sermon preached on that specific value? To determine the answer to this question, I compared listeners’ assessments of each spiritual value reported in the initial questionnaire with their assessments of the same spiritual value reported after listening to the sermon based on that spiritual value. Whereas I might have hoped that my sermons would have increased their reported assessment of the spiritual value about which they just heard a sermon preached, the change was insignificant. Indeed, the majority of listeners reported no change at all. It is worth considering that many listeners initially reported values of nine or ten on their assessment of the spiritual values upon which we were focusing, so there was not much room for growth or “improvement” in their assessment.

Did *The Witness of Last Words & Legacy* sermon series increase listeners' awareness and appreciation for the spiritual values presented? One of the questions on the final survey asked, "With respect to your own sense of theological legacy, how has this sermon series increased your awareness and appreciation for ***" (where *** represents the spiritual values addressed in each sermon).

Table 2 shows the average group response to this question for each of the spiritual values presented.

Table 2: Sermon Series Influence on Listeners' Awareness & Appreciation of Spiritual Values – Group Response

Sermon Series Influence on Listeners' Awareness and Appreciation of Spiritual Values -- Group Response		
	N	Value
God's Faithfulness (to you and to all creation)	31	8.03
Gratitude (for all that God has done)	31	8.52
Dedication & Service (commitment to follow in Jesus' steps)	31	8.32
Forgiveness (receiving forgiveness from God and forgiving others)	32	8.50
Love (received from God and extended to others)	31	8.52
Hope (for this life and confidence in God's eternal promises)	32	8.81

Figures 9-14 on the following pages show individual responses for each of the spiritual values presented. Each histogram shows on the horizontal axis the values given by listeners on a scale of 1-10 to a question on the final questionnaire: "With respect to your own sense of theological legacy, how has this sermon series increased your awareness and appreciation for the following..." Each histogram represents one of the spiritual values that was the focus in each of the sermons presented. The vertical axis illustrates how many listeners responded with that value assessment.

Figure 9: Sermon Series Influence on Listeners' Reported Awareness and Appreciation of God's Faithfulness

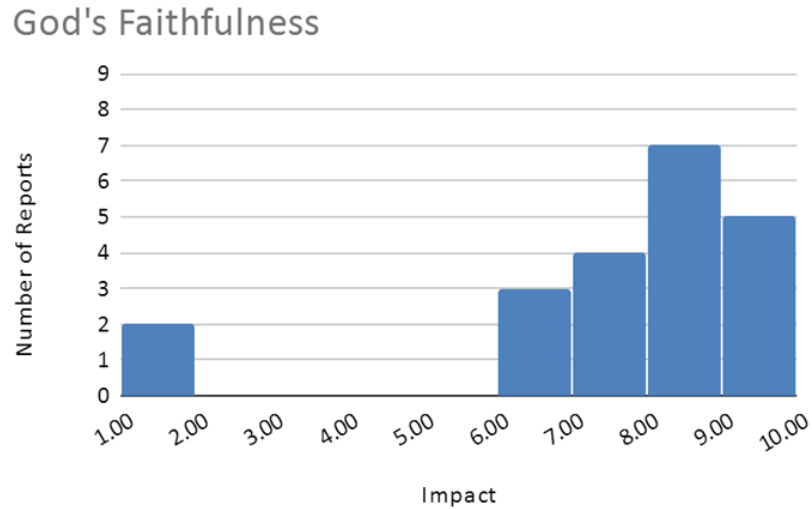


Figure 10: Sermon Series Influence on Listeners' Reported Awareness and Appreciation of Gratitude

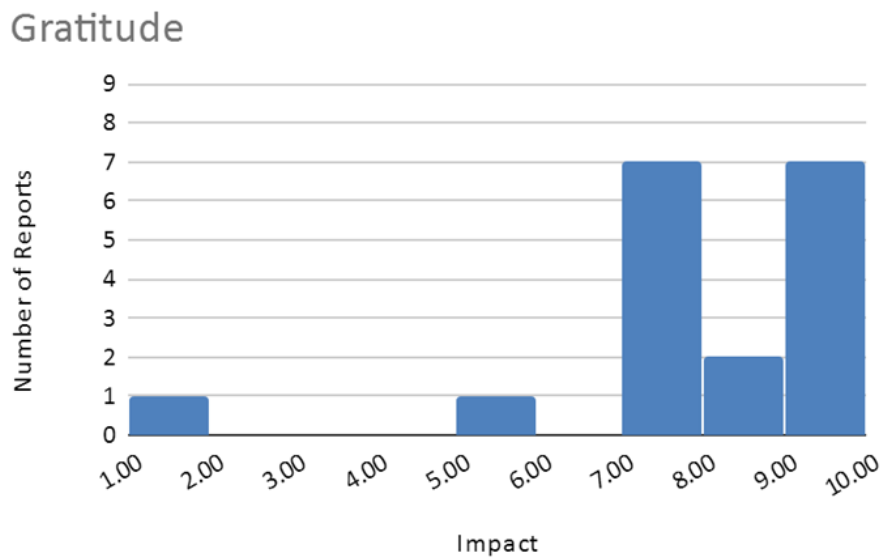


Figure 11: Sermon Series Influence on Listeners' Reported Awareness and Appreciation of Dedication & Service

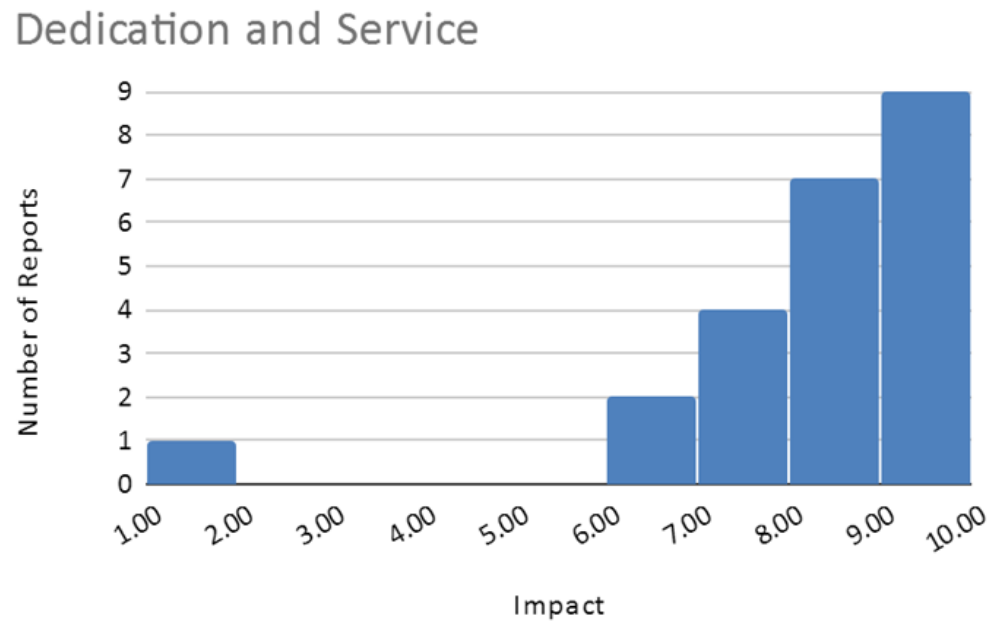


Figure 12: Sermon Series Influence on Listeners' Reported Awareness and Appreciation of Forgiveness

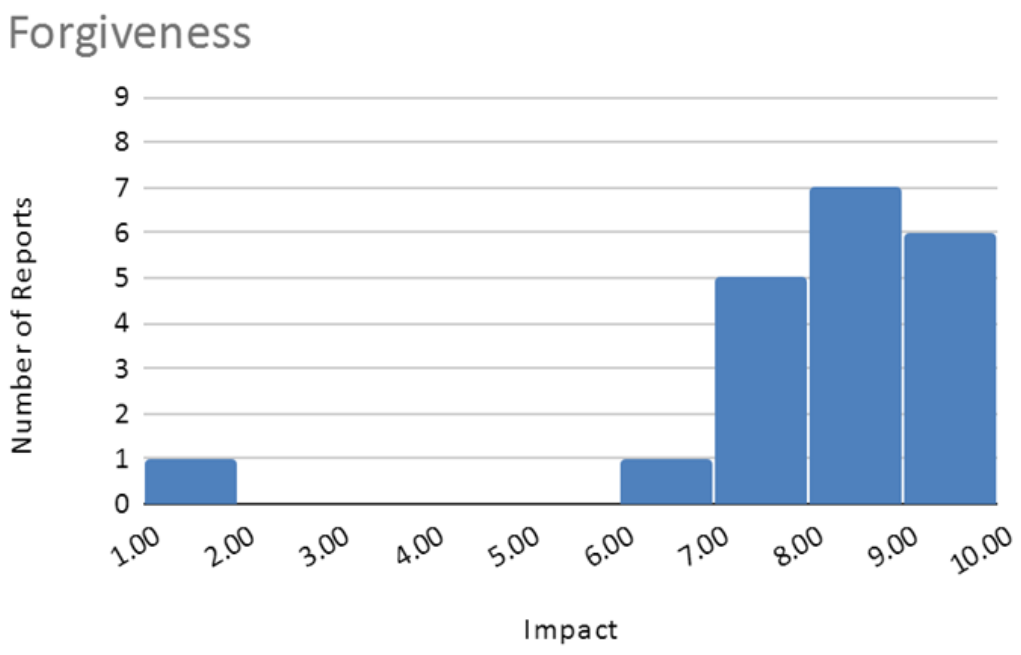


Figure 13: Sermon Series Influence on Listeners' Reported Awareness and Appreciation of Love

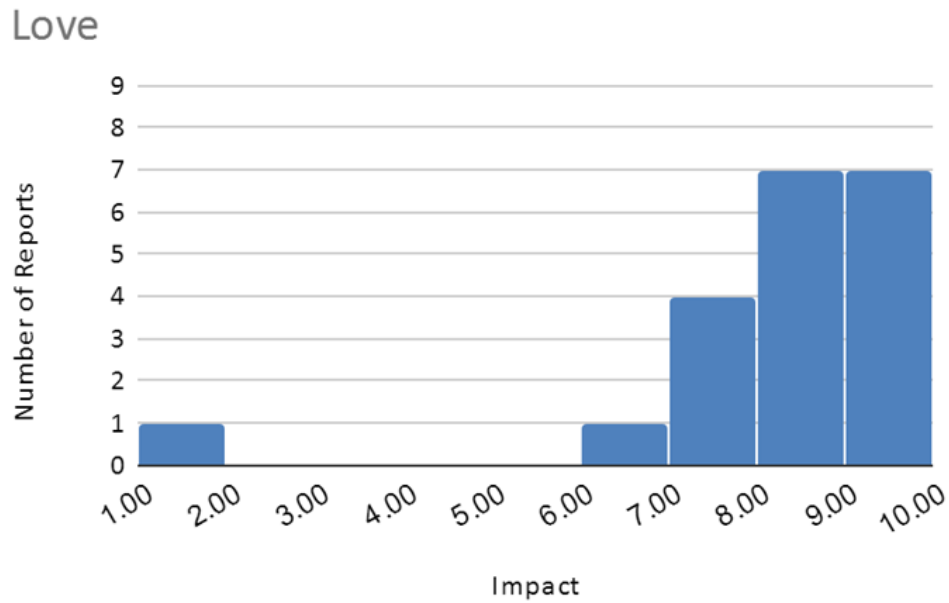
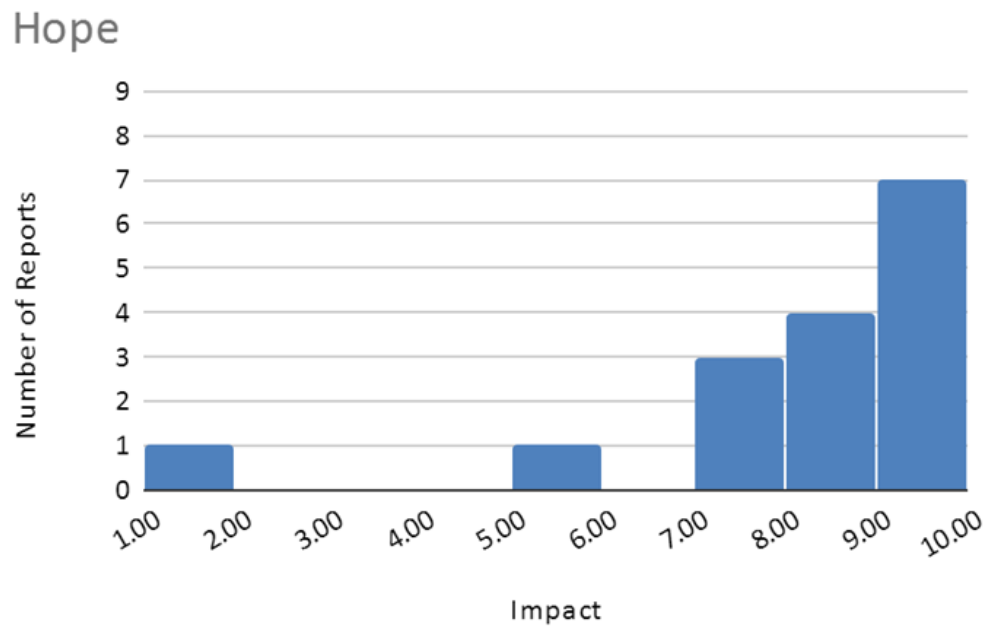


Figure 14: Sermon Series Influence on Listeners' Reported Awareness and Appreciation of Hope



Was any sermon in *The Witness of Last Words & Legacy* series more effective than the others, as far as assisting listeners in thinking through their personal core theological convictions? See Table 3 for listeners' self-assessment on this question, reported after each sermon. Responses shown are for average group response, based on a scale of 1-10.

Table 3: Sermon Series Influence on Assisting Listeners in Thinking Through Personal Core Theological Convictions – Group Response

Sermon Series Influence on Assisting Listeners in Thinking Through Personal Core Theological Convictions -- Group Response		
	N	Value
God's Faithfulness	43	7.37
Gratitude	38	7.92
Dedication & Service	30	7.77
Forgiveness	46	7.57
Love	42	7.86
Hope	37	7.38

While Table 3 shows that while each sermon did influence listeners' thinking about their own core theological convictions, the two sermons that focused on the subjects of gratitude and love had the greatest influence on listeners' consideration of their central spiritual values.

Was any sermon in *The Witness of Last Words & Legacy* series more effective than the others, as far as assisting listeners in thinking through their hoped-for theological legacy? See Table 4 for listeners' self-assessment on this question, reported after each sermon. Responses shown are for average group response, based on a scale of 1-10.

Table 4: Sermon Series Influence on Assisting Listeners in Thinking Through Hoped-For Theological Legacy – Group Response

Sermon Series Influence on Assisting Listeners in Thinking Through Hoped-For Theological Legacy -- Group Response		
	N	Value
God's Faithfulness	42	7.57
Gratitude	32	7.65
Dedication & Service	30	7.43
Forgiveness	46	7.37
Love	42	7.74
Hope	37	7.49

While Table 4 shows that each sermon did influence listeners' thinking about their hoped-for theological legacy, the two sermons that focused on the subjects of love and gratitude had the greatest influence on listeners' consideration of their central spiritual values.

Was any sermon in *The Witness of Last Words & Legacy* series more effective than the others, as far as motivating listeners to share their theological legacy? See Table 5 for listeners' self-assessment on this question, reported after each sermon. Responses shown are for average group response, based on a scale of 1-10.

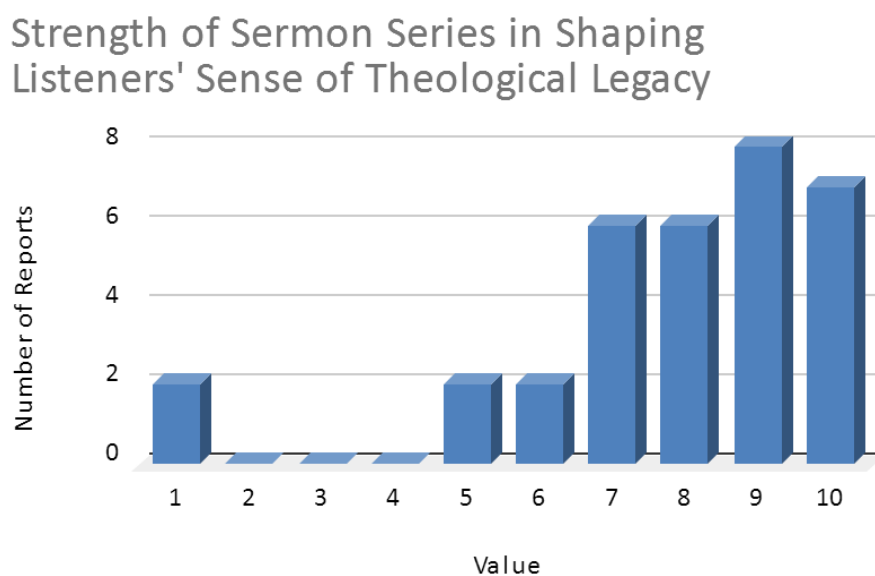
While Table 5 shows that each sermon did influence listeners' motivation to share their theological legacy, the two sermons that focused on the subjects of love and forgiveness had the greatest influence in motivating listeners to share their theological legacy.

Table 5: Sermon Series Effectiveness in Motivating Listeners' Sharing of Their Theological Legacy – Group Response

Sermon Series Effectiveness in Motivating Listeners' Sharing of Their Theological Legacy -- Group Response		
	N	Value
God's Faithfulness	41	7.34
Gratitude	37	7.43
Dedication & Service	30	7.00
Forgiveness	46	7.52
Love	41	7.71
Hope	37	7.32

Finally, how strongly did this sermon series, *The Witness of Last Words & Legacy*, shape listeners' sense of theological legacy? This was one of the questions on the final questionnaire. The responses are reported as a histogram in Figure 15.

Figure 15: Strength of Sermon Series in Shaping Listeners' Sense of Theological Legacy



Of the 33 who responded to the question, the average group response was 7.76.

While other questions could have been asked and addressed from the data collected by listeners who participated in this project by completing questionnaires and surveys, the questions I've asked and addressed in this chapter are the most significant. The data collected was sufficient to answer the most important questions, and I was able to determine the effectiveness of *The Witness of Last Words & Legacy* sermon series toward helping listeners think through their theological convictions and their theological legacy, as well as toward determining whether or not the series was effective in actually helping them share their theological legacy. A more in-depth evaluation of the effectiveness of this project is considered in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 6

EVALUATION

Several components were involved in the experience of those who listened to the sermons in *The Witness of Last Words & Legacy* series. There were, of course, the sermons themselves. In addition, there were the hymns chosen for each particular Sunday, the selected Prayer of the Day, and the presence of the unique faith community that had gathered for worship on each particular Sunday. All of these could not help but influence listeners and inform their experience.¹

My initial questions concerning *The Witness of Last Words & Legacy* series, whether the proclamation of the Word or focusing on last words speeches would indeed motivate people to further consider their own theological convictions, was answered positively in the responses received from the surveys. I also learned that listeners were positively influenced by hearing these sermons, as far as thinking more deeply about the theological legacy they would like to leave for successive generations. Moreover,

¹ I trust that the reasons are clear why I did not set up an experiment to control for these additional factors. To do so, I would have had to create a very artificial experience, such as bringing listeners into a room, one by one, and having them listen to me preach these sermons without any of the additional components. Indeed, even when I specifically asked listeners how each particular sermon influenced their thinking on a certain subject, it would be difficult, if not impossible, for them to compartmentalize their assessment, by allocating one value to the selected hymns (selected precisely because they stressed the same theme), and separate values to other components of their worship experience.

listeners reported that the sermon series was effective in actually helping them share their theological legacy with those who matter most in their lives.

All of this was good news. The results I received encouraged me and gave me reason to believe that the work I did in preparing the sermons, as well as the actual preaching itself, mattered. That listeners reported growth in their thinking (and doing!) of theological legacy, communicated to me that the work being done served to extend the Kingdom of God, in whatever little way, by passing the faith on to the next generation.

Besides the numerical values I received and recorded to the questions in the surveys given, I also received significant feedback in the final questionnaire, in which listeners were given opportunity to share written feedback on the sermon series and on the project as a whole. I will now address several matters that were raised.

Respondent #1 reported unsolicited feedback in Survey #3, making it known that the sermons in the series did not influence their theological legacy because “I don’t have anyone to leave a theological legacy to.” As with Respondent #1, Respondent #2 wrote, “I have no children, so I have nobody to leave a legacy to. The sermon series was well done. I was just not the target audience.” Although I tried to make it absolutely clear in the sermon series that one’s theological legacy is not exclusively limited to one’s children, clearly this was not communicated to at least these two respondents. (But indeed, passing on one’s legacy to the next generation could include influencing the younger generation in the church community, younger people in one’s neighborhood, or generalized further still by considering all those who will outlive you as recipients of one’s theological legacy.)

Respondent #2 also reported that leaving a theological legacy was not “important in my life.” The respondent went on to write that it was “the job of the church, not the job of the members” to teach theology. From this comment I determined that a sermon on the priesthood of all believers would be in order, not only for this respondent. A message on this subject would be profitable instruction and would serve as an important reminder for all members of the congregation. Indeed, the sharing of our faith is the responsibility of the Church, but the Church is comprised of more than its pastors and leaders.² The Church as a whole is tasked with the proclamation of the Word as well as the ministry of reconciliation.³

Respondent #10 remarked that *The Witness of Last Words & Legacy* series had given him “a chance to reflect on how I have prepared my children and myself for... following Christ.” A more considered faith was part of my intention in preaching this series, so this comment provided affirmation that I had effectively done so (at least for this person).

Respondent #11 commented on the series, “It has reminded me that the hour to act is now, even though my thoughts are not completely formed. Much of what I think is clear and ready to present to my son. He is ready to receive it now.” These comments affirmed that the sermon series was effective in helping this man think more deeply about his theological convictions (while acknowledging they were not completely formed) and also think more deeply about the importance of passing them on. However, the final step

² See 1 Corinthians 12:12-27.

³ See 2 Corinthians 5:19-20; Matthew 28:18-20.

was not reported to have been taken to actually share with his son his own spiritual values in an intentional way.

Respondent #17 remarked, “The series has not only reinforced the basic truths of our faith, but it also has made me more aware of my responsibility to share them with my family and friends.” I take her words, “basic truths of our faith” to refer to what I variously called in the sermons “theological convictions” or “spiritual values,” and so it is clear that the respondent has thought more deeply about her own theological convictions, due, at least in part, to having experienced the sermon series. Her understanding of the importance of passing on her legacy has also increased. But, as with respondent #11, the final step of actually sharing her legacy with others was not cited.

Respondent #20 simply wrote, “Caused me to consider,” which is at least something. At least there was evidence that that person was awake, listening and contemplative. It’s a start!

Respondent #22 sloughed off the responsibility of sharing his legacy by commenting, “Hard for a person late in life to pass on to younger generation. This series should be of greater value to younger parishioners.” This was an ironic statement, because one of the main reasons I selected the subject of legacy for my thesis work was the senior status of my congregation. I can hear my younger parishioners saying, “I’m too young to be thinking about legacy! That’s for old people!” I suppose the tendency is widespread to consider any work as someone else’s job. So it seems to be the case with passing on the faith to the next generation. In future newsletter articles I intend to address some of the results of my project and responses to my thesis topic. The responsibility

given to all of God's children to pass on our cherished legacy is one of the first subjects I plan to address.

Respondent #24 wrote, "It has certainly brought more thoughtful attention to my legacy. I need to fulfill this feeling and commitment." In sharing these words, he expressed the effectiveness of the second intention of my thesis: to have listeners consider more deeply their own theological legacy and their motivation to share it.

In one of the more thoughtful responses I received, respondent #26 opined,

This sermon series has had a profound impact on my sense of spiritual/theological legacy. This sermon series has put my faith under a microscope and brought forth a reinvigorated sense of hope. Hearing about the experiences of prominent biblical figures forced me to examine my faith from a new perspective.

His words revealed a deeper contemplation of his faith and a more intentional consideration of his legacy. The spiritual value of *hope* was also specifically mentioned in his response.

Respondent #50 shared a similar thought: [This series] "brought to the forefront and reinvigorated the importance of thinking through my spiritual legacy. That it is an ongoing process, I am well aware of, but the sermons injected new thoughts into my mind." With these words, she communicated experiencing a more thoughtful faith and a greater consideration of the legacy she would leave to others.

Respondent #51 was most complimentary: "As usual, your sermons impact my way of thinking – and this series has not disappointed!" A general, positive impact was reported, but no specifics given.

Respondent #53 reported in Survey 2, next to the rating scale (from 1-10), "problematically subjective." Of course, the respondent is correct in stating that the scale

is indeed subjective. Whether it is problematic or not is debatable. But since the respondent failed to complete all of the survey or turn in any other (that could be tracked), it seemed clear that, for whatever reason, he did not want to participate.

Another comment made on this same subject of the subjectivity of the rating scale (although perhaps by a different listener), is that he could not be sure he remembered how he had responded to one of the questions (repeated in each successive survey) the week prior. Still, since longitudinal comparisons were made only for respondents that could be tracked throughout the series, it is safe to say that although one respondent may not have had the same evaluative judgment on the rating scale as another respondent, each respondent's evaluative judgment should be relatively consistent throughout the series.

Respondent #60 stated, "I have thought more of what I plan to do." This comment is akin to Respondent #20. At least I know that I have an attentive audience.

Respondent #61 had much to share:

Awareness. I hadn't given it much thought prior to this sermon series. This series has reminded me of the spiritual legacy my paternal grandmother left with me. She shared and lived her faith openly and with confidence. This had a big impact on [me] growing up and as an adult.

As for my spiritual legacy: [my husband] and I are the only ones in our family who attend church. Our families reject the faith, and it is very difficult to discuss it with them. Our hope is that by observing our faith and practice, they will come to faith on their own.

Not only did these comments bear witness to the value the respondent has for the importance of the legacy she has received, she is intent on passing it on to the next generation, and she is well aware of the challenges of doing so.

Respondent #64 commented on the first survey, after listening to the sermon on the faithfulness of God, "Love the reminder. My grandmother passed on strong God's

faith [sic] and instilled this.” She bears witness of the importance of the legacy she has received from her forebears.

Respondent #73 clearly did not appreciate the subject matter of my thesis, or at least the way I phrased my question. In response to successive questions concerning legacy, the respondent wrote: “It is not about my legacy”; and again: “It is not my legacy, but God’s”; and “NA, not my legacy,” and similar statements for the remainder of the survey. He even crossed out the words in the last question: “and as a spiritual value and would like to pass on in your theological legacy.” The good news is that the respondent reported this in Survey 2, so I had the chance in successive sermons to consider his comments and to try to do better at communicating in a way that would align with his semantics. I’m not sure if I succeeded in doing so.

In the first survey, after the sermon on God’s faithfulness, Respondent #81 wrote next to the question about whether the sermon helped her to think more about her theological convictions, “Good review of many verses I was familiar with. Good to recount God’s faithfulness to me.” As in much preaching, I suppose, new information is not given/received as much as reminders are made of what we already know and need to hear again. In the same survey, the respondent wrote next to the question asking if the sermon motivated her to share her theological legacy, “Can’t push too hard with words, but I try to live out my faith through my actions - the way I live my life.” In these words, she brings up the challenge of bearing witness in a way that is positive, helpful and will

have a chance of being received. Her words also remind me of the words of 1 John 3:18: “Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.”⁴

Respondent #82 wrote, “Definitely helped me to think more about it, and to take some steps to share.” I take the first part of her statement to indicate further thoughts she had concerning her own theological convictions, as well as her thoughts about passing on her legacy. The second part of her statement gives evidence that she was motivated to take some actual steps in passing on her spiritual legacy to others.

Respondent #93 opined honestly: “I find Joshua’s words empty. He is a preacher of ‘might is right.’ Where is God’s love, mercy and faithfulness for the Amorites, Moabites, Edomites and Canaanites?” While the respondent took issue with Joshua, he also revealed implicitly that he strongly values God’s love, mercy and faithfulness for all people. I trust I brought that out in the sermon, but that is not what this respondent heard. In the sermon I stressed God’s faithfulness in a general sense, and I specifically made reference to God’s faithfulness to Abraham and Sarah and their descendants. It is clear that this listener also wanted to hear a word about God’s love for those conquered by the Israelites. The point he raises is a worth at least one sermon in the near future that addresses his passionate concerns.

Respondent #95 shared, “This sermon series has allowed or assisted me to think more seriously about my spiritual legacy. I really enjoyed this series and found it beneficial.” She bears witness to the effectiveness of the sermon series to address the

⁴ It further reminds me of the famous quote attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: “Preach the gospel at all times. When necessary, use words.”

second point of my thesis: to motivate people to think more deeply about the theological legacy they would like to leave to the generations to come.

Respondent #97 shared,

With individuals mentioned in the Scriptures (as spoken of in your sermons), it is very reassuring to know that because of their faith and urgency to spread the gospel, they have left us our faith and our legacy. Now it is up to us to pass this on to those we know, strengthening our spiritual values. By sharing with others, God will make us aware of our own spiritual values and strengthen them (and, hopefully, help those who receive this, that they will become aware of these gifts from God).

This respondent has expressed most clearly what I had hoped the sermon series would accomplish: to help listeners think more deeply about their own theological convictions; to help them consider the essentials of what they would like to pass on to those who will follow after them; and, finally, to motivate listeners to take the next step and actually do their level best about passing on these cherished values to others.

In my overall evaluation of this project, the following strengths are evident. First, sermon listeners became more deeply acquainted with biblical last words speeches (whether in spoken or written form), the concept of legacy, as well as several characters within the biblical canon. It was shown that the sermons in *The Witness of Last Words & Legacy* series assisted listeners in thinking more deeply about their theological convictions, considering their own legacy and actually sharing their spiritual legacy with others.

The project also served to encourage listeners to more deeply consider their own thoughts about legacy and assisted them by providing them with content they could point to and incorporate in their own spiritual legacy.

Another strength of this project was helping listeners be more intentional about sharing their spiritual legacy with others. In turn, this contributed, if only in small part, to the health and vitality of the church in the present day as well as infusing the next generation with the ingredients of faith that will be vital to the ongoing life of the Christian Church.⁵

One weakness of this project is that there was no dialogue. No opportunities were provided for questions and answers. The project consisted on a series of sermons preached with purpose for specific outcomes which proved worthy to that extent. However, there was no preliminary meeting (which would have afforded the opportunity to explain terms and better prepare listeners for what they were about to hear).

To improve on this project, one might include opportunities for questions and answers with the presenter. Discussion groups following each preached sermon with guiding questions to assist listeners in identifying the spiritual values they cherish most might prove helpful. Not only would this provide listeners with an opportunity to digest the sermon and process their own thoughts, by engaging with fellow listeners there would be mutual learning from one another and spurring each other on to love and good deeds.⁶ Work also might be done by listeners following this or a similar preaching series to identify specific ways they could be intentional about sharing their theological convictions with those who come after them.

⁵ C.S. Lewis writes of the Son of God, “He came to this world and became a man in order to spread to other men [sic] the kind of life He has – by what I call ‘good infection.’ Every Christian is to become a little Christ. The whole purpose of becoming a Christian is simply nothing else.” C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1952), 153.

⁶ Cf. Hebrews 10:24.

A follow-up project might also incorporate questions posed by listeners after each sermon. Questions could be collected and, after the sermon series is completed, used as the basis of additional sermons.

Additional information could also be gathered in the initial questionnaire. For example, listeners could be asked to identify their top three spiritual values. Listeners could also be given a list of dozens of spiritual values and invited to select their top five. Preachers could select several values cherished by the community and preach on those subjects. In pursuing the subject of legacy, preachers might not confine themselves to last words speeches but could select passages from the entire biblical canon.

Exploration might also be made on identifying the ancestors of legacy from within the congregation. Sermon listeners might be asked from whom they received their treasured spiritual values. This action might well serve as an encouragement for listeners to commit themselves to share their own cherished faith with others.

Many other possibilities could be identified that would attend to the same goals of encouraging listeners to grow in their identification and commitment to their own spiritual values, to consider more strongly those to whom they will pass them on, and to motivate them to carry out their commitments to do so. Whatever efforts are made toward this end would advance this project and further serve to build up God's Church.

CHAPTER 7

REFLECTION

If hindsight were foresight, what would I have done differently? An open forum offered before the beginning of the sermon series would have served me and my listening audience well. It would have provided me with the occasion to more carefully explain the intent of my thesis, define the terms I used in my questionnaires and surveys, as well as what I hoped to measure by the surveys and questionnaires prepared and disseminated. I could have engaged my listeners in conversation and dialogue, further assisting them in their preparatory thinking before the first sermon was preached. Of course, doing so would have added another component variable into the project. To determine the effect of the open forum experience I would have had to track those who were present at the forum, as well as those who were not present but who came to the sermon series fresh and completely unbiased by any preparatory work.

One of the next steps that could be taken would be to facilitate a mentoring program in my congregation, whereby senior members would be connected with younger members (perhaps confirmands). Many different scenarios come to mind, which I address below.

Confirmands and parents could visit senior members together, not only to share their own life and vitality with senior members, but to learn from the seniors the central

spiritual values they hold dear. The young could learn from the older adults what they consider the best of what they have learned, the highlights of their lifelong experiences.

Seniors could be asked to write out (or dictate to someone) those theological convictions that matter most to them and what they would like to pass on to others as a spiritual legacy. Seniors could be interviewed and audio (or video) recordings made. I expect that these written records or audiovisual recordings would not only be cherished by their children and grandchildren, but treasured by generations to come. There could be an entire library of the records and recordings of those who are mature in the faith sharing concisely or at length what they have come to know and cherish about God. Younger believers and newer believers alike might greatly benefit in reading, listening and watching these mature disciples give their own witness of last words.

In my first years of service as the pastor of ILC, every month I invited a member (or friend of the congregation) to share at our morning services a five-minute presentation we called Focus on Faith. Willing presenters were given suggestions on what they might address as they shared their faith with eager listeners. It would be good to reinstate these presentations, as it was said to be a wonderful encouragement to many of those who heard the shared testimonies.

The challenge of propagating the Christian faith from each generation to the next is serious indeed; it is a monumental and mandated task. (Deuteronomy 6, especially 6:4-

9 and 20-26,¹ plus 26:5-16² speak to this biblical mandate.) While I learned in this project that the intentional preaching of cherished spiritual values, handed down to us as a treasured legacy by generations who have gone before us, can indeed serve to encourage, motivate and equip others, in turn, to pass these cherished values to others, the challenge of intentionally passing on the faith remains. The proclamation of the Word is akin to

¹ “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! ⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. ⁶ These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. ⁷ You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. ⁸ You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. ⁹ You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.... “When your son asks you in time to come, saying, ‘What *do* the testimonies and the statutes and the judgments *mean* which the LORD our God commanded you?’ ²¹ then you shall say to your son, ‘We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and the LORD brought us from Egypt with a mighty hand. ²² Moreover, the LORD showed great and distressing signs and wonders before our eyes against Egypt, Pharaoh and all his household; ²³ He brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the land which He had sworn to our fathers.’ ²⁴ So the LORD commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God for our good always and for our survival, as *it is* today. ²⁵ It will be righteousness for us if we are careful to observe all this commandment before the LORD our God, just as He commanded us.

² “You shall answer and say before the LORD your God, ‘My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down to Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; but there he became a great, mighty and populous nation. ⁶ And the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, and imposed hard labor on us. ⁷ Then we cried to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction and our toil and our oppression; ⁸ and the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with great terror and with signs and wonders; ⁹ and He has brought us to this place and has given us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. ¹⁰ Now behold, I have brought the first of the produce of the ground which You, O LORD have given me.’ And you shall set it down before the LORD your God, and worship before the LORD your God; ¹¹ and you and the Levite and the alien who is among you shall rejoice in all the good which the LORD your God has given you and your household.

¹² “When you have finished paying all the tithes of your increase in the third year, the year of tithing, then you shall give it to the Levite, to the stranger, to the orphan and to the widow, that they may eat in your towns and be satisfied. ¹³ You shall say before the LORD your God, ‘I have removed the sacred *portion* from *my* house, and also have given it to the Levite and the alien, the orphan and the widow, according to all Your commandments which You have commanded me; I have not transgressed or forgotten any of Your commandments. ¹⁴ I have not eaten of it while mourning, nor have I removed any of it while I was unclean, nor offered any of it to the dead. I have listened to the voice of the LORD my God; I have done according to all that You have commanded me. ¹⁵ Look down from Your holy habitation, from heaven, and bless Your people Israel, and the ground which You have given us, a land flowing with milk and honey, as You swore to our fathers.’

¹⁶ “This day the LORD your God commands you to do these statutes and ordinances. You shall therefore be careful to do them with all your heart and with all your soul.”

daily bread. Today's word will not serve well for tomorrow's need. While the prophet promises that the word of the Lord will stand forever,³ this does not mean it serves as a kind of Everlasting Gobstopper.⁴

From this project I have come to a deeper appreciation of the challenge of communicating the Good News. I expect there are other preachers like me who trust that intentional, faithful sermon preparation and enthusiastic preaching will assuredly transmit the faith, spoon-feeding the seated audience before them (like a mother bird feeds her chicks). However, it has become clear to me that faithful preaching does not easily result in every listener hearing what the preacher endeavors to communicate. Thus, the task is left to preachers to faithfully proclaim the Word, week after week, fully engaged and aware of the context in which they work their craft. Monitoring the flock by listening to the bleating of the sheep, preachers can better ascertain what their listeners have actually heard and then adjust subject and language to better address the congregation.

I have also been encouraged in this project by how strongly many of the sermon listeners cherish their faith and how intent they are to share their treasured theological convictions with others. Jesus is quoted in the Gospel of John as saying, "The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life" (John 6:63). This project has given me insight into the deeply held faith by members of my congregation, many of whom assess this cherished faith as life indeed. I have been reawakened to the unique privilege and weighty responsibility of proclaiming these words of life to those hungering and thirsting

³ See Isaiah 40:8b.

⁴ In Roald Dahl's book, "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, the Everlasting Gobstopper is a candy that has very peculiar qualities: it changes colors and flavors, but it never gets any smaller and it never disappears. One is all you need. The Everlasting Gobstopper is a candy that is tasty today, tomorrow and forever.

for them. Scripture states in both Old and New Testaments, “Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4; Deuteronomy 8:3). This project has increased for me the importance of imparting this life-giving word to all who will listen.

Let all those who have been called by God to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ, as well as all others who are baptized into the Name of the Triune God, take seriously the call to intentionally share the treasured values of the Christian faith with the next generation. It would be a blessing if we preachers would join Ron Hutchcraft in beseeching our gracious God: “O Lord, help me play my position in a way that will bless You and those generations yet to come. And may those who come behind me find me faithful.”⁵

Indeed, the counsel given to Timothy from the apostle Paul, and one spoken to most preachers at their ordination, holds true for preachers in our day more than ever:

I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus.... preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth to myths. But you, be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry (2 Timothy 4:1-5).

The apostle’s words are a fitting conclusion to this thesis, since they were some of the last words of witness written by this mature servant of God (and self-described chief of sinners⁶) to a young pastor who would carry on his ministry. It is important to consider

⁵ Hutchcraft, *Genealogies, Graveyard and Grandkids*.

⁶ See 1 Timothy 1:15.

these words of Scripture, warning us that communities will seek to have “their ears tickled” and will “turn aside their ears from the truth” (a dangerous endeavor, building on sand⁷). The mandate given to Timothy is the same mandate given to all those called to preach the word: be faithful in its proclamation. This will serve to guide listeners and focus their attention on the core theological convictions of the faith, so that they might pass on to others the heart of the true faith, that they may not be lured away by false and frivolous teachings.

The last words belong to my great-grandfather, Sam. He was no less than one hundred years old when he spoke them to me, after I had shared with him that I had decided to go into the pastoral ministry. Although he lived well into his 107th year, I can well consider them some of his last words. I can still hear his “old country accent,” as his words of counsel echo in my mind. They are words I have cherished and taken with me throughout my ministry, “Derek, just remember to tell the people Good News. There’s enough *bad* news in the world already.” To those words I say a hearty “AMEN!” And I hope that I will never forget them, fully live into them, and pass them on to the generations that follow after me, as part of my own cherished legacy. SDG.

⁷ Compare the words of Jesus cited by Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 7:24-27.

APPENDIX 1: SERMON #1: GOD'S FAITHFULNESS

God's Faithfulness: The Basis of our Legacy

John 19:25-27

October 6, 2019

What are the important ingredients that make your life worth living? What are the values you cherish, that give you meaning and purpose in life? What are the spiritual principles that are so important to you, that you have assessed with such great value, that you want very much not just to claim them as your own and live into them fully, but, even more, to do all that you can to pass them on to the next generation?

We find clues in Scripture about cherished and treasured values. The evangelist John tells us near the end of his writing that Jesus did many other things that were not written down, but these were written *that we many believe* that He is the Messiah, and that we might *come to have life* in His name (John 20:30-31). The events John had chosen to write down for future generations are those that communicate the truth that Jesus is the Messiah, the Chosen One of God.

But even more than that, I want to make the case that when a person is going to address an audience for what may be the very last time, when a person is aware that *this particular moment* could be the final interaction with *this audience*, he or she does so with no little intention. Indeed, the person making the address may well sift through a lifetime of learning and experience, to give to those listening the very best of what one has to offer, those cherished and treasured spiritual values, those things that matter most.

It is my contention that as we hone in on what we might call last words speeches of the Bible, we will not only be given insight into what is most important to the speaker, but as we listen, we will consider what is most important *to us*, and further consider if the witnesses that are made in these last words speeches are not indeed *worthy of emulation*. Which is to say: perhaps we will come to appreciate and value more than ever before these qualities that not only served to give meaning and purpose to the speakers, but to us listeners, as well. AND, even more, we might consider them worth passing on to others. Indeed, we may find ourselves compelled to do so.

Prayer... Almighty God, we give You thanks this day for the witness borne by those to whom You have drawn near. We thank You for their words which have been recorded for our edification, and we pray that as we give our attention to their words, we would hear Your Word speaking through them. We pray that we might incorporate their important values into our own lives, cherish and treasure them, and learn to bear witness to our own faith, that, in turn, it might bear witness to future generations. These things we ask in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In a series of six sermons, I will share with you several last words speeches or final witnesses recorded in Scripture. As we focus on these words together, we will find that they are words that are steeped in those things that are most cherished and treasured by generations of believers.

In this, the first sermon, I focus on the faithfulness of God – what is, I think, the foundation of all of our spiritual values. John tells us simply, “We love, because He first loved us.” The Christian life is always lived in response to what God has first done for us. Indeed, God is the great Initiator.

And so, if we are to be faithful, or if we are to have any faith at all, it will be in response to a faithful God.

As Jerusalem was being burned by the Babylonians, as the people of God looked upon what they *never* expected to see, the prophet Jeremiah led the nation in great lament. But in the midst of the lament, Jeremiah spoke out in words of great hope, “The Lord’s lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Thy faithfulness” (Lamentations 3:22-23).

Through jubilant times of joy and through dreary days of distress, God is ever faithful. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that God has said “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5). And God tells Joshua as he receives the mantle of leadership from Moses, “As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you. Be strong and courageous” (Joshua 1:5-6).

Over and over again, the Scriptures bear witness to the faithfulness of our God.

In preparation for the delivery of what would be Joshua’s last words, Joshua gathers the leaders of Israel together. They’ve conquered and settled the Promised Land. And as Joshua gives his last recorded speech to the people before he dies, in faith he recounts the acts of God. It’s as if he pages through his photo album, peruses his spiritual journal wherein he has written all of his prayers – and God’s answers to them – and shares those God Moments with the leaders.

Joshua reminds the people that God had called Abraham and Sarah, who came from families that worshiped *other* gods (who were no gods at all), and God made promises to them, which He later fulfilled.

Joshua reminds the leaders that God was faithful to rescue Abraham & Sarah's descendants when they were being held in bondage by the Egyptians.

Joshua reminds the people that God was faithful to the people while they traveled through the wilderness, making their way to the Promised Land.

On and on, Joshua recounts the history of God as he tells the story of God's people.

This is the *basis* of the commitment Joshua will invite the people to make. God's faithfulness comes first, and it is the reason the people have hope for the future. They know that God has proved Himself faithful to them in the past, and they trust that God will continue to be faithful to them in the days to come.

In Paul's last letter to the Church of God in Thessalonica, in the last chapter he writes to them, he asks his beloved brothers and sisters in Christ for their prayers, as he continues to go about his apostolic work, bringing the Good News of Jesus to yet other communities. Paul recognizes that the road will not be easy for the Thessalonians, because not all are believers; Paul knows that evil surrounds them as a pack of wolves surrounds vulnerable sheep. But Paul encourages them, "The Lord is *faithful*; and He will strengthen and protect you from the evil one" (2 Thessalonians 3:5).

There are times too numerous to count that portray the faithfulness of God shown to us in Jesus:

But we remember Jesus in the Garden before He was handed over to Pilate, praying while His disciples slept.

We remember Jesus reaching out to save Peter, when the anxious disciple was sinking into the Sea of Galilee

We remember Jesus returning to Thomas, the one who had been absent on that first Easter evening, showing this one who had doubted His hands and His side.

And in some of the final words of Jesus recorded in the gospel of John, from Calvary's cross Jesus continues His work of care and compassion, as He speaks tenderly to His mother and to His beloved disciple.

Can there be any grief like that of a mother grieving for her only child?

Although Mary was warned early on that a sword would pierce her own heart, and although she was blessed with insight about Jesus and treasured that insight about His identity and purpose as long as she lived, how could her heart not break into a million pieces, as she watched the son she adored be cast away and crucified?

Although we may well say Mary was blessed by God to know that Jesus was giving His life more than it was being taken from Him, that this event on the cross was a gracious act of divinity more than it was a deplorable act of humanity, a Good Thing more than it was a Bad Thing, this did not remove the pain she experienced as she watched her son suffer and die.

For Jesus to go to the cross, He necessarily had to leave His mother. But He would not abandon her. He would not forsake her. Indeed, He would continue to care for her, even as His own life was ebbing away. He would be *faithful* to the end, as He provided His beloved disciple to take His place of sonship. And as He did so, He was also providing the breaking heart of His beloved disciple with a mother who would care for him as her own.

From the cross Jesus demonstrates that He is ever *faithful*, and in so doing He demonstrates the *faithfulness of God*.

This is the ultimate spiritual value. God is faithful, and because of that we can have faith. God is trustworthy. He is worthy of our trust. And in Him, our faith finds a welcome and secure home.

Writing about the patriarch Abraham, whom God tested with respect to *his* own beloved son, Paul writes in Romans 4, “With respect to the promise of God, he (Abraham) did not waver in unbelief, but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God” (v.10). Abraham believed in the promise God had made to him, because he knew that God was trustworthy. And this confident faith of Abraham lifted high the name and reputation of God, who does not go back on His promises, but who is ever *faithful*.

The faithfulness of God is the foundation we must return to, time and time again.

In some of his last words to Timothy Paul writes, “Though we be faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself” (2 Timothy 2:13). All of our Christian lives are based and built upon it.

May the knowledge of the faithfulness of God inspire you to respond in living a faithful and faith-filled life. For as Paul urges Timothy,

“The time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. ⁴They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. ⁵But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.”

In other words, respond to your faithful God by answering His call upon your life and discharging your God-entrusted duties in all faithfulness.

It is good for you not only to commit yourself to take your stand on the faithfulness of God. It is also good to consider how you might impart this same value to those who follow after you – your children and grandchildren.

Share your story about what the faithfulness of God means to you. And your witness, like the witness of those who have preceded you, will impact future generations, inspiring faith in them, faith that is founded upon the faithfulness of God.

APPENDIX 2: SERMON #2: THE LEGACY OF GRATITUDE

“The Legacy of Gratitude”

Matthew 26:6-13

October 13, 2019

It has been said that those who are the happiest in life are those who are the most grateful. My experiences have been consistent with that assertion. Gratitude and happiness seem to go hand in hand.

If you *are* grateful, you are grateful for *something* or to *someone*. Gratitude is a response to something that has been done for you. To feel gratitude and to express it is the opposite of thinking you're *entitled*. A grateful person does not have an attitude of deserving, an expectation that you've got everything coming to you, that all of life's goodness should automatically flow in your direction. Instead, gratitude is a humble appreciation for the gift of life, a welling up of surprise, an overflowing thanksgiving for the grace and blessing that flow down from heaven from the Father of Lights. Gratitude is an appropriate response to the faithfulness of God.

Yesterday, following our 15th church hike, I was famished, and so I made my way to my favorite local hamburger chain. It had been awhile since I had indulged in such food fare, so I made a beeline to BK. As I was navigating the strip mall parking lot, straight on and head on in front of me was a vehicle that was stopped in the center of the driving space between two banks of parking spots. The vehicle's hood was up and battery cables attached to its battery were hanging down in front of the car and onto the

pavement. Standing by the side of the car was a frustrated and sullen man about my own age. I parked my truck, then asked the obvious question, “Do you need any help?”

“Yes, I do,” he replied. “And you wouldn’t believe how many people have just passed me right by without asking.” I wondered how that was possible, since his car was all but blocking the way. “Go ahead and get your food first; I don’t want to inconvenience you.” No problem, I told him. And it took less than five minutes for me to back my truck out of the space, connect our batteries, infuse his battery with power from my own, disconnect, re-park and both be on our way.

But what was most meaningful to me in the whole interaction was his gratitude. In my mind, I had done little (delayed my hunger by a mere five minutes). But the man repeatedly expressed his appreciation, thanking me again and again for stopping to assist him.

I wonder if the man told those important to him in his life about this incident? Could he have contained his gratitude? Or was it something he felt compelled to share? And as he so surely did share, was he not instilling in others an awareness and appreciation of the blessings that come through others? The blessings that come.... from God?

Prayer...

This sermon is the second in a series of six, in which we will turn our attention on the last words of several different biblical characters. As these are *last* words, it’s likely that they are infused with greater meaning than regular day-to-day ordinary speech. Instead, those who speak or act do so with great intention, seeking to pass on to those around them the best they have to offer. As we listen to their last words, it’s my hope that

we will consider those things of greatest value to us and think more deeply about what spiritual values we would like to pass on to those we cherish most.

In our readings for today we begin with Moses, who is in the midst of giving his farewell speech to the Children of Israel after they've completed their forty year wilderness journey. Moses, the servant of God, is giving the people final instructions to prepare them to enter the Promised Land.

Moses first reminds them that they are *inheritors* of God's promise made to their ancestor Abraham. How *blessed* they were to be the generation that would actually inherit the land; how *graced* they were, that the promises of God would come to fruition in their own time. These matters were a long time in coming, and Moses wanted to make sure the people were aware of how *unique* their situation was, of how fortunate and favored they were.

In these last words of Moses, he has come to a deep sense of gratitude in his own life of faith. Even as his aged eyes are clouded over, he's come to see clearly the grace poured out upon him by a powerful and gracious God. And his heart is filled with gratitude that he has been blessed with such a life.

Moses seeks to instill his appreciation, his gratitude, into the lives of the people who will enter the Promised Land without him. Far from waiting to the end of their lives to express this cherished value, he urges them to do so at the very beginning of their Promised Land experience, and to begin a practice of gratitude.

Soon after entering the land, soon after they settle down and reap the benefits God brings them *through* the land, they're to take some of the first of those crops and offer them back to God, as an acknowledgement that they are gift more than they are earned.

And these actions are to work in them an attitude of gratitude.

Moses seeks to ingrain in these Children of Israel, these Children of God, in their deepest sense of self, their connection to their ancestors and to previous generations. So much so that when they remember what their ancestors encountered, they will claim them as part of their very own experience. They were not only to remember the past; it was to become part of their own personal history, their own sense of being.

And they would remember and confess that it was *the LORD* who had been faithful to them (as we saw last week). They would remember and confess that it was *the LORD* who had brought them out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

And the people were to rejoice. Their hearts were to be crafted and shaped that they might be filled with gratitude.

This is part of the spiritual legacy Moses wants to instill in the people he had guided over the last third of his life.

In our second lesson this morning, we read the words of one of the last writings of the apostle Paul, who writes while imprisoned in Rome. He writes to a congregation that he has founded, a congregation that had become very dear to him.

“I thank my God every time I remember you,” he begins, setting the stage for all that follows. He begins in gratitude, and when the congregation reads these words, how can they *not* respond by treasuring that value of the apostle in their own lives of faith? He goes on to tell them that he has them in his heart.

The apostle cherishes this congregation, and Paul leaves no doubt in their minds about their place in his life. His heart is filled with gratitude for them, and all the

instruction that follows flows from that spirit. He wants the very best for them in the sight of God.

Finally, we come to Jesus, our Savior and ultimate example. It's one of the last interactions He has before He goes to the cross. In fact, the action that takes place in this scene sets in motion the one who would betray Jesus to begin his sinful scheming.

Jesus is in Bethany, on the outskirts of Jerusalem. It's Holy Week, the last week of His earthly life. He's in the home of one known as Simon the Leper. An unnamed woman enters the gathering and proceeds to anoint his head with costly perfume. Her action is met with indignation by the disciples. They knew the value of the perfume, and they deemed this pouring out as prodigal, lavish, extravagant, wasteful.

But there is purpose and intent in what this woman does. Jesus defends her action, and in fact raises it up to a place of prominent importance, something that would (or at least should) accompany the Gospel message.

You may know that Christ means the anointed one. And this is what the woman does for Jesus. She anoints Him, and in this act she not only prepares Him for His burial (as Jesus declares), but she recognizes Him, identifies Him, marks Him, as the Christ, the Messiah of God.

Jesus Himself recognizes that this woman comes to Him with a heart overflowing with gratitude; she pours out upon Him the very best she has to offer. And Jesus Himself expresses appreciation; Jesus Himself expresses humble gratitude.

Moses the servant of God. Paul the Apostle. Jesus our Lord. Each of them had hearts filled with gratitude for the mercies poured out upon them. And each of them

sought to instill this attitude of gratitude, this humble spiritual value, upon all who would listen.

May their witness inspire us all to recognize how truly blessed we are by our faithful God. May our hearts well up and overflow with gratitude, a fitting response to our gracious God. And may we consider well the ways we can pass on this cherished value to others, by our actions and by the words we share. For in so doing, we will grow into the fullness of our humanity, and live into that which God created us to be. To God be the glory. AMEN.

APPENDIX 3: SERMON #3: COMMITMENT, DEDICATION & SERVICE

“Legacy: Commitment, Dedication & Service”

John 21:15-22

October 20, 2019

At the end of the Book of Joshua, Joshua gives his final words of witness to the Children of Israel, after they’ve entered, conquered and settled the Promised Land. He begins by recounting the faithfulness of God, who made good on His promises to Abraham by delivering the land over to the Israelites. We read the beginning of this passage a few weeks ago, when we concentrated our attention on the faithfulness of God, and we noted well that God’s faithfulness comes *first* and that any part *we* play is in *response* to what our faithful God has *first* done for us.

This morning we hear the second half of Joshua’s last words. There’s a turning point in the passage, when Joshua basically says: This is what God has done for you, now: what do you say? How will you respond? How will you order your life? What commitment will you make?

Important words for the Children of Israel to consider. Important words for *us* to consider, as those who have been claimed and called of God.

Prayer...

Joshua advises and counsels the people regarding the best way to respond to God’s faithfulness: Put away all false gods (which their ancestors had served and which, evidently, the idols that had been crafted to represent those gods had been carted and

carried with them through the years – even out of Egypt and with them in the wilderness wandering!)

Then Joshua, the good leader that he is, takes his own stand and confesses before the people those famous words: “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

Finally, he hands it over to the Children of Israel. It’s their turn now. Upon what will they take their stand? What legacy will they choose to leave for those who would come after them? What story would they tell, when they sat their children and grandchildren down to convey to them, “This is the God we have chosen to worship and serve in our lives. This is what we do as a family. This has been our stand, and these are the convictions into which you have been born. We encourage you to follow in our steps for this reason: we have come to know the faithfulness of God!” How would the Children of Israel respond to Joshua’s appeal?

Four times the leaders among the people make their confession; four times they state their intentional commitment: “We too will serve the Lord, because He is our God” they say in verse 18. “We will serve the LORD” they insist in verse 21, after Joshua, perhaps in an effort to ensure their commitment would be a serious one had pushed and prodded them, told them they would not be able to do so. Joshua again steps in to verify that the people fully realize what they’re doing by making this public confession and commitment, and, for the third time, the people affirm, “Yes, we are witnesses!

Finally, Joshua then tells them, “Okay, if this is what you intend, then you must act: You must part with the idols you’ve become so attached to.” And for the fourth time in verse 24, the people confess: “We will serve the LORD, and obey Him.”

Here we witness a passionate, no-compromise commitment. And yet we also witness a tempered, humble commitment, for the people recognize that this is a serious matter – their commitment to follow the ways of God, to keep the commandments of the LORD. They recognize that it will not be easy, that they will fail more often than they would like. But their failures are neither to weaken their passionate commitment, nor cause them to beat themselves up and admit defeat when they slip up.

Many times the people responded with the best of intentions, “Yes, Lord, we will do it!” Joshua is wise enough to know they will waver and falter. Still, their commitment matters. Still, Joshua calls them into dedicated service – and we see Paul & Jesus do the same thing.

Turning to the Book of Acts, we look in upon the apostle Paul and his last words to the Ephesian elders.

In Acts 20 Paul reminds them of his own commitment; he reminds them of the dedicated life he had lived out in their midst, in plain view of them all:

That he had served with great humility.

That he did not hesitate to preach that which was helpful.

That he had, in his preaching, issued a call to repentance from sin and to put their faith in Jesus.

Paul expresses his commitment to move forward in his own call with great courage, planning to go to Jerusalem where hardship and imprisonment are anticipated. And he does not shy away from it.

Even though his life is at risk, Paul does not hesitate; he confidently and courageously sets forth to finish the race before him; he is intent on completing the task.

And the apostle declares his innocence in the midst – that he was faithful in proclaiming the whole will of God; that he had kept nothing from them – that he had been unafraid to call them to repentance; that he did not hesitate to proclaim the grace of God.

Then he encourages them, in addition to the example he's already given in his own life:

Keep watch – over yourselves and over all those the Lord has entrusted to your care.

Shepherd the church of GOD (and he reminds them that it is God's Church and not their own)

Be on your guard for those who would twist the truth, to the detriment of God's people. There will be wolves that will infiltrate and seek to devour God's sheep.

Paul commits them, entrusts them to God. Paul gives us a wonderful example, for as we consider our own witness to our children, grandchildren, and all those who are precious to us – there are times we're saddened that our efforts have not resulted in our children abiding in the faith. Entrust them to God – who loves them even more than you do.

Paul reminds them how hard he worked in their midst, never being a burden on them. He coveted nothing in their possession.

Paul reminds them of the well-remembered words of Jesus: "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

And finally, Paul closes with prayer – another example of entrusting them to the care of a gracious and faithful God.

When we look to Jesus and His interactions with Simon Peter, we quickly remember Peter denying Jesus three times, and the parallel is not lost upon us when we hear Jesus ask Peter three times, “Do you love Me.” And three times Peter insists that he does.

Jesus knows the truth about Peter. He knows that the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. Peter does not claim too much. He admits that he is unable to love Jesus perfectly; the apostle has learned a hard lesson that any commitment he makes, as passionate as he makes it, must be tempered with humility.

And in their final interaction, when Peter questions Jesus about another disciple – when Peter inquires about Jesus’ call on this other man’s life and this other man’s response – Jesus speaks plainly to Peter: “What is that to YOU? YOU follow Me.”

And so the call to commitment is a personal one – and it’s a call that Jesus makes to each one of us this morning. There is a song I remember from my youth which contains the lyric: “Though none go with me, still I will follow.” Could that be said of you? Will you answer the call of Jesus in your life today, no matter how those around you respond?

I remember when I was in high school and my youth director resigned; I remember when he left our church and went elsewhere. I was devastated. Because this was the truth: This man strongly encouraged my faith. But I soon realized it went further: The greater truth is that I was living my faith through him. And when he left, I felt a deeper call of Jesus to become mature in my faith, to answer the call of my Lord directly and to give myself over to a more impassioned commitment, tempered with humility.

In Paul's letter to the Philippians, one of his final letters from prison containing some of his last words, we read of his deep personal commitment to Jesus. He writes, "Whatever was to my profit (that is, all of his earthly accomplishments, anything and everything that could be compiled and credited to him as success) I now consider loss... compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord (this is the only place the apostle uses the personal pronoun)... and be found in Him not having a righteousness of my own... but that which is through faith in Christ."

This propels us right into Reformation Sunday next week – and All Saints Sunday to follow.

Today we've heard the witness of the last words of Joshua to the Children of Israel, the last words of Paul to the Ephesian elders, and the last words of Jesus to Peter. We've seen examples of leaders and the personal legacies they left, and we've heard their final words of encouragement and caution. My hope and prayer is that hearing the witness of these last words has inspired and encouraged you, to make a more passionate commitment to follow Jesus as your Lord. My hope and prayer is that you will dedicate or rededicate your life to His service, with deep humility, to love and care for all people with the compassion of Jesus for the glory of God. AMEN.

APPENDIX 4: SERMON #4: FORGIVENESS: THE LEGACY OF LIFE

Forgiveness: The Legacy of Life (The Undeserved Gift of Grace)

Luke 23:32-34a

November 10, 2019

September, 2018. Botham Jean, a 26-year-old accountant – shot and killed in Dallas by his neighbor, Amber Guyger, an off-duty police officer who had entered his apartment. Guyger later said she was confused and mistakenly thought his apartment was her own. When she saw him, she perceived him as an intruder.

One year later, at her trial, an emotional courtroom scene took place, when Botham’s younger brother, Brandt, hugged Amber and said “I forgive you ... I don’t even want you to go to jail. I want the best for you. Because I know that’s exactly what Botham would want.” Botham’s father Bertrum said he also forgave her. “I don’t want her to rot in hell; I don’t want her to rot in prison. I hope this will help her to change and recognize the damage, the hurt that our family’s going through...So I wish her well and I will pray for her family and pray for her as well.”

The attorney for the family said “This was an extraordinary moment from an extraordinary family. They are a very godly family and what Mr. Bertrum and Brandt were talking about was her internal grace, even though Alison, the mother, has expressed that there must be worldly consequences.”

Forgiveness is not easy. And some, in the name of justice, will cry foul and dispute the dispensation of forgiveness. When true forgiveness is offered, however, a great cost is exacted by the one who extends it.

If life is the greatest gift God has given us, then forgiveness is the gift that sustains it. Forgiveness breathes life into our relationships and keeps them going. Without forgiveness, relationships shrivel up, dry up, and become lifeless.

But when we forgive, we not only give the gift of life to others, we give the gift of life to ourselves AND we make possible a continued relationship with the one who has hurt us.

Indeed, if life is the greatest gift God has given us, forgiveness is the gift that sustains it.

But how can we muster up the ability to forgive?

In confirmation class a few weeks ago we studied one of my favorite books of the Bible: Jonah. "Who deserves the forgiveness of God?" I asked. "Everyone" was the answer. We broke that down a bit and decided that God willingly extends forgiveness to anyone and everyone, but that the truth is: NO ONE *deserves* the forgiveness of God. Forgiveness is a gift of grace.

As with any spiritual value, forgiveness toward others is worked in our hearts as we first experience the forgiveness of God. Receiving the forgiveness of God works in us the *possibility* that we might forgive others.

Jesus tells the parable of the man who is forgiven much by his master, but then leaves the presence of his master to exact a pittance from someone who is in his debt.

Although receiving forgiveness from others makes it more possible for us to forgive, it is not a guarantee that those who have received it will go forth and do likewise.

Case in point: King David.

Psalm 32 is a wonderful psalm. David certainly knows the blessing of forgiveness in his life.

We read in Scripture that David was a “man after God’s own heart,” and he is arguably the greatest king Israel ever had. Scripture does not pretend David was a sinless man, nor does it cover up David’s grievous sins. In fact, his sins are famous – certainly not something any one of us would wish to have said about our own sins.

David knew what it was like to feel the weight of guilt, to harbor his sin internally; he experienced the futile and foolish endeavor of attempting to hide his sins from God. “When I kept silent about my sin,” he writes, “my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me; my vitality was drained away, as with the fever heat of summer.” And when he had had enough, when he had reached his proverbial “rock bottom,” he acknowledged his sin before God. And he experienced the assurance of divine forgiveness and the peace and lightness of being that came with it. And so David could well say, “How blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.”

Experiencing the forgiveness of God enables and encourages us to respond appropriately by forgiving others. But it is not always easy for us poor sinners. And sometimes we receive the free gift of God’s forgiveness and continue in our rebellious and retributive ways.

Sadly, in David's last words and actions, he does not forgive his enemies – whom he had actually promised no retribution. The legacy David leaves is not ambiguous. He makes his intentions clear; he as much as orders hits on his enemies through his wise son, Solomon, who will “know what to do.”

And when David's promised descendant arrives on the scene almost 1,000 years later, this son of David would do things quite differently. Indeed, Jesus, the Son of David, would be an altogether different kind of King.

From what some would call His earthly throne – the cross of Calvary – Jesus declares in some of His last words, a much different petition. In fact, it is diametrically opposed to His ancestor David's last words. Whereas David appealed to his son to wreak revenge on his enemies, the Son of David implores His Father to forgive the sinners in His presence, before any outward signs of confession or forgiveness are made. “Father, forgive them,” Jesus utters. In some of His last recorded words before His death, Jesus speaks the words – and one wonders if He's referring to the criminals crucified at His sides or to the soldiers sorting His meager belongings at His feet. “They know not what they do.”

In Jesus we see a clear example: Forgiveness is extended in grace; it is not deserved. It simply comes from the heart of a gracious and loving God. And as the confirmation kids knew from deep down within themselves: This forgiveness is extended to all of God's beloved children, who, so many times, know not what they do.

In this series on the legacy of last words, we have considered the faithfulness of God (as the foundation of our legacy). We've considered gratitude and dedicated commitment to serve God's children as faithful responses to the faithfulness of God. And

we consider today that as God's beloved children, we are a forgiven people. We rejoice that we have come to know God as One who graciously forgives us when we openly confess our sins before Him; truly, God even extends His forgiveness before our own repentance and confession. His forgiving grace can indeed work repentance in us.

This is an important part of the legacy Jesus has left us. One we ought to treasure and cherish, and one we would rightly extend to our friends, neighbors, children – and enemies.

The Apostle Stephen, sometimes referred to as the first Christian martyr, dies in a very similar way to his Lord. In some of his last words about Jesus, he is judged by his listeners as having spoken blasphemy, and they're moved to pick up stones to stone him to death. Stephen appeals to God not to hold their sin against them. Certainly this is evidence of the work of God in his own heart, evidence of the forgiveness he himself received from the throne of grace.

I pray that on my death bed I will not follow King David – that my last words will not be words of animosity against those who have hurt me. I pray that my last words will be akin to the last words of Jesus and Stephen, words of grace and forgiveness extended to any and to all who have caused me pain. And I pray that those who are present to hear the witness of my last words will be moved in their deepest being by my words and actions, that they might experience the power of forgiveness and incorporate in their deepest being forgiveness as a cherished spiritual value.

The best way to get there, of course, is to practice the hard work of forgiveness throughout my earthly days. And I have found no better way to do *that* than to be

reminded, again and again, of the gracious forgiveness poured out for me in Jesus Christ my Lord.

When asked what allowed him and his son to be so forgiving, Bertrum Jean said:

“That’s what Christ would want us to do.”

Thanks be to God!

APPENDIX 5: SERMON #5: THE LEGACY OF LIKEWISE LOVE

“The Legacy of Likewise Love”

John 13:1-17

November 17, 2019

This sermon is the 5th in a six-sermon series concerning spiritual legacy. I’ve been concentrating on last words speeches in Scripture, with the thought that when people are speaking what they know to be their last words, they will be more intentional with that which they share, and the spiritual matters they value most will “rise to the top” and will find their way into their final words of witness.

I began by drawing our attention to the **faithfulness of God** – what I called the *foundation* of all of our Christian spiritual values. We then looked at *gratitude* as a faithful response to what God has first done for us; gratitude as a cherished spiritual value. Next, we focused on **commitment to service and a life of dedicated discipleship** – responding to the One who has called us to follow. Last week we focused on **forgiveness** as a cherished spiritual value – and that to receive it or to give it is to receive or to give the gift of life.

And now, this morning, we direct our attention to the **love of God**, and **our love** – for God and for each other. Indeed, many, when considering the chief characteristic of God, settle on this characteristic of love. And there is Scriptural precedent for this, as well, since we read in the Holy Word, “Anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love” (1 John 4:8).

Prayer...

Dr. Harry Wendt, of Crossways fame, has considered the words of Genesis 1 that God created male and female in His own image. Wendt has concluded that since God is love, He created His human creatures to love – to love God in response to His love, and to love one another. This, he maintains, is what it means to be created in the image of God.

If Dr. Wendt is right, this theme runs all the way through Scripture. This morning, in addition to this reference to Genesis 1, we will look at three additional references to love as a spiritual value, each of which was presented in a witness of last words.

In our first Scripture chosen for today, Moses addresses the Children of Israel before they enter the Promised Land. He's prepping them for success. Deuteronomy is composed of three sermons given by Moses, at the end of which he breathes his last. And so these are some of his final words, and they have become words cherished by the Jewish people for millennia. Indeed, it may be said that this Scripture, more than any other, defines them **as a Jewish people**; indeed it defines them specifically **as the people of God**. *This* is how they are to live as God's people.

"Hear, O Israel," Moses begins. In other words: pay attention to these words. Listen to what I'm saying. "The LORD our God is one." Moses insists that theirs is a monotheistic faith. That all things come from God, who is the sole Source of all that exists. This first and chief commandment (later verified and confirmed by Jesus) is to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might." One could argue that for Moses, this is his chief spiritual value. He goes on to tell the people that if they are to rightly follow this one God from whom all things come, they

must value **loving God** above anything else that they do. Their whole lives are to revolve around it, evidence that love and be a testimony to it.

Secondly, Moses insists they also teach their children to live lives accounted as loving God, as well. If this happens, their charter as a nation will be perpetuated forever, as one generation teaches the next to follow the ways God has set before them in the law, which can be summed up as loving God and loving neighbor.

Thinking about the **next generation**, we now turn to the 2nd Epistle of John – a one page “book” of the New Testament. John (or the community that writes in his name) addresses the second generation of believers. There are clues in this 13 verse letter that both writer and readers are enduring a time of persecution. Some of the core teachings of the faith and being questioned and challenged, while other teachings have arisen that are contrary to the teachings of Jesus and had to be **called out** and **put out**.

But the core teaching and cherished spiritual value of **love** is prominent in this shortest of all the New Testament books (a mere 315 words). The word *love* is mentioned **five times**. John reminds the readers that **loving one another** is not a new commandment but one that they’ve had from the beginning – certainly from the beginning of their walk as followers of Christ. And as we have seen, this command to love neighbor goes back to the teachings of Moses, if not all the way back to Genesis 1.

The command John refers to in this epistle is the command to **walk in love**. And here we see that these teachings continued well after the first generation of believers – indeed, it continued to be passed on to each successive generation. For without love, one would not have what we call the Christian faith.

And now we look to the chief passage this morning, from John's Gospel, the 13th chapter.

We are hardly halfway through the Gospel, and we've already reached some of the last words and last actions of Jesus.

In the opening verse of the 13th chapter, John tells us that **Jesus knew the time had come for Him to leave this world and go to the Father.** And John then says that Jesus **now showed them the full extent of His love.** John also tells us that **Jesus knew that He had come from God and was returning to God.**

The divinity of our Lord is presented to us. And it is communicated to all readers of the gospel that what is about to take place is a divinely sanctioned act: Jesus takes the form of a servant and He washes His disciples' feet.

Of course, John writes after the fact, with full perspective of the person and work of Jesus. But those who were with Jesus at the time were taken aback by this One they had clearly seen to be heaven sent, when He took up the basin and the towel. This was slave's work, and, in their eyes, not proper work for their Master, their Rabbi, their Lord. It seems clear that they were embarrassed to have Jesus do this for them; they deemed it *improper* for Him to demean Himself to that of a foot-washer.

Peter refuses outright. **Never will you wash my feet!** And, so typical of this impetuous one, in the next verse he changes his mind and invites Jesus to **wash his hands and his head as well.** It seems that Peter wanted all of what Jesus had to offer, but his understanding of what this meant was in its embryonic stage. Peter had a lot to learn.

After carrying out this humble act, Jesus dresses again and sits with His disciples at table. He asks them if they know what has just happened. If any dared to offer an

interpretation, none is recorded. It's likely that *Peter's bewildered response* was the response they *all* had: this was not something they expected Jesus to do.

But the evangelist tells us that this was the full extent of His love for them. Jesus would humble Himself before them. He, their Master, would take the lead in serving them all.

And then we read some of the most poignant words in all of the gospels: **You call Me Teacher and Lord – and you are right, for so I am. If I, then, your Lord and Teacher washed your feet, you should also wash one another's feet. I have set you an example, that you should do as I have done to you.**

Later in the chapter, Jesus gives them a new commandment: **“Love one another, as I have loved you.”** This is the mark of Christian discipleship, the mark by which all would identify this motley crew as disciples of Jesus – by their love for one another. Jesus, the embodiment of God, the embodiment of love, called His followers to love with His love, to love with the love that they had received personally from Him.

Last week I told you that receiving the forgiveness of God creates in us the possibility of sharing that same forgiveness with others – but that it does not guarantee that those who have received it will go and do likewise.

Even so with the love of Christ: Receiving the love of Christ creates in us the possibility of loving others with the love of Jesus. But it does not guarantee that we will go and do likewise.

Judas is a case-in-point. Even as Pilate's hand-washing was ineffective in removing the guilt of his soul, so when Jesus came to wash the feet of Judas, He knew

that cleansing Judas' feet would not ensure that those same feet would not leave the room and walk into a sin that would take him to a place from which he would never recover.

Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them, Jesus said.

I have heard many tell me that a Christian can speak about love till the cows come home (well, they might not have put it exactly that way). But what they really want – what the world really wants – is acts of love, not just spoken words.

“Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.”

Jesus has called us to love, but it is *not just any kind of love*. It's a **likewise love**. It's a love that has first and foremost been poured out upon us by our Lord Himself.

“Greater love has no one than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” Jesus will say in chapter 15. Jesus will proceed to do not only that. He will lay down his life even for His enemies, even those who hammer in the nails of His crucifixion.

But the nails hammered onto the cross did not hold Jesus there. The stone rolled across the tomb did not contain Him. Jesus shows us victory in the outpouring of His life. And Jesus assures us that in laying down our lives for others, in **words and acts** of love, we will arrive at life indeed.

Jesus calls you to likewise love – this day and every day.

Rejoice in His awesome love poured out for you. Rejoice that in the waters of baptism, Christ has cleansed you – body, mind, spirit and soul – and set you free to serve humbly in His name, for His glory.

Thanks be to God!

APPENDIX 6: SERMON #6: LEGACY: OUR CONFIDENT HOPE

“Legacy: Our Confident Hope”

John 14:1-3

November 24, 2019

Dearly beloved of God: Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

And in the words of the Apostle Peter: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By His great mercy, He has given us a new birth into a **living hope** through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3). A **living hope** through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...

In this series of six sermons, we have been focusing on the legacy we’ve received from those who’ve gone before us – a legacy of spiritual values that has been passed down from them to us. And during our consideration of legacy, we’ve listened to the last words speeches of many in the pages of Holy Scripture, with the idea that those who present their last words to any particular audience will have sorted through, or sifted through, their most important life experiences and the most important knowledge they’ve gained, and offer to their audience, in their last words speeches, that which is most precious and most cherished: the spiritual treasures they will pass on.

This morning we focus on the spiritual treasure we call *hope*. Let us pray...

Prayer. O Lord our God, we come before You in this place today, longing to hear Your voice. We come before You in our varied lives: some of us are filled with hope;

some of us have lost our hope altogether. We pray that our hope would be centered where we can be sure of it, where we can be sure of its fulfillment. That is: a hope centered in You. And we pray that the words of my mouth and the mediation of our hearts would be pleasing and acceptable in Your sight this day. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Hope has been defined as “an optimistic state of mind, based on an expectation of positive outcomes with respect to events and circumstances in one's life or in the world at large.”

It seems to me that the deeper question is, “Upon **what** do we base our hope? Or, “In **whom** do we place our hope? That hope might be *real* hope, and not just wishful longing.

In Ezekiel's day, the prophet was speaking to a people who had pretty much given up all hope. Ezekiel's audience never expected to be in the life situation they found themselves in. Their enemy had come in, destroyed their city, destroyed their temple, destroyed life as they knew it, and carted them away into exile.

They became homeless. They had to leave their home in Jerusalem, and they were taken out into exile. Something they never expected to take place in their lives.

There were prophets at that time who spoke to this people and told them not to worry, that God would soon rescue them and take them home. But these prophets were not speaking for God. These prophets were only telling the people what the people wanted to hear.

The true prophets, those who could see more deeply into the situation the people were in, told the people they'd better hunker down, pray for the city they had been taken to and build houses, for it was going to be awhile before they'd return to their homeland.

And of course, the people didn't want to hear from these prophets. They wanted a quick fix to their situation.

Prophets like Jeremiah spoke these words to the people, and they were shunned and tossed out. People didn't want to hear the news of what their future held or how long they were going to be in this foreign land. And so this was a people who didn't have much hope at all.

In what is perhaps the most famous of all the chapters in Ezekiel – chapter 37 – God gives Ezekiel a vision. And in the vision Ezekiel sees a valley filled with bones. And Scripture says that Ezekiel looked, and he saw this valley full of bones, and lo, they were very dry.

Well, God couldn't have given Ezekiel a better picture of what was going on with Israel. And then God says to Ezekiel, God asks him, "Son of Man, can these bones live?" Well, obviously, the answer is, "No." These bones are dry and dusty. Life is the very last thing you'd expect from them.

But Ezekiel is a wise man and a good prophet. And his answer to God is, "Lord, You know. **You** know the answer to the question. For the only way these bones can live is if **You**, O Lord, do something about it." By this answer, Ezekiel is expressing the view that with God all things are possible. But without God, surely the answer is no.

What God tells Ezekiel, after He asks him the question, "Can these bones live?" God says, "This is the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off...'" (37:11).

And then God shows Ezekiel the outcome of the vision, as these bones come together. And there's this rattling – this auditory experience that Ezekiel has. And then

there are muscles and sinews and skin that come on these bones. God breathes into them new life, and they become alive again. In this vision, God assures Ezekiel that the hope of the people is *not* gone. **God** is their hope. And **God** will bring them home.

As if to echo this vision in chapter 37, in chapter 47, Ezekiel relates one of his last visions in one of his last speeches to the people. In chapter 47 he tells them that he saw in his vision from God water flowing from the temple; it flowed from the south end toward the east. And as it flowed the water became deeper and deeper. The water was life-giving; there were all kinds of fish in it. And the water had healing purposes. It was another vision that communicated to the people that their hope was in God – and that God had a good future in store for them.

We also read from Revelation 22, the very last chapter of the Bible. It is one of the last visions and some of the last words of the apostle John. And John also is addressing a people not that much different from the people Ezekiel addressed thousands of years before him.

John writes to a people who are enduring great persecution. They were people who were in danger of just letting go and saying, “Our hope is gone.” John encourages the people to hold on and to trust in their God, who is faithful and true. John encourages them to bear witness to Jesus Christ and to trust in Him. No matter how bad life looks – even if their life is gone – life is certain in Jesus.

In the book of Revelation, John reveals what he has seen. This heavenly vision – water flowing from the throne of God. Life-giving water, that everyone who comes near it, everyone who touches it, receives life and healing.

Hope is *not* gone. Hope is certain in our God.

It's not only people in the Bible days who lived with lack of hope for their future. We have many, even in our community, certainly in our world, who live without hope each day. There are many today who have no hope for their future.

I spoke to someone recently who told me she awakens each morning, expecting just another dreary day. She expects things to get no better. She's living without hope.

In Joshua 3, Joshua speaks to the people about entering the Promised Land. The people had been waiting for generations for God's promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to come true. And now, finally, they're about to cross the Jordan and enter this Land of Promise.

We were studying this, this past Wednesday in our Bible Study group. Joshua tells the people **how** this is going to take place; Joshua tells them what they're going to do. The people aren't going to just march right into the land. Joshua tells them, "You haven't been this way before. You don't know where you're going! So this is how it's going to happen. You're going to follow the priests, who will carry the ark of the covenant (which symbolizes the presence of God). The priests who carry the ark: they're the ones who are going to go first." Joshua communicates that it is God who knows this land. God will be their leader. God will bring them home and usher them into the Promised Land.

Even so, Jesus, as He comforts His disciples before His impending death, tells them not to be worried, not to be troubled. "You believe in God; believe also in Me. For in My Father's house, there are many dwelling places. And I go there to prepare a place for you." Jesus can, with authority, tell His disciples these words. And Jesus can, with

authority, tell us, because Jesus is the only One who has been in heaven, who has come to earth to tell us what it's all about.

And Jesus says He goes to prepare a place for us. And that if He goes to prepare a place for us, He will come again and receive us to Himself, that where He is, there we will be also.

Jesus knows the way. He knows the way to get there. In fact, He says to His disciples that He *is* the way – and the truth and the life.

“You have not been this way before,” Joshua tells the people, “So you are to follow the lead of God.”

“You have not been this way before,” Jesus, in effect, tells His disciples. “And so, let Me take you by the hand; I will take you home.”

This hope that Jesus gives us is not just a heavenly hope; it is a hope that can give us new and proper perspective in this life, right here and now. We can begin to enjoy this hope that will one day be fulfilled in heaven. This hope can begin to be realized even now. Jesus comes to give us new lenses through which to view this life and the hardships we encounter in it.

Sometimes it's not easy, and sometimes we wonder what's going on. We wonder where God is. But the hope that Jesus gives is a certain hope of heaven (because of Him) and the assurance of His presence in our lives today.

In some of Paul's last words to the Church of God in Rome he says in chapter 15: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

As you've listened to the last words of witness from some of these biblical giants, you've been given the gift of their spiritual legacy – and what a legacy it is! These cherished values: the faithfulness of God; our gratitude in response to God who is faithful; a commitment to serve and to dedicated discipleship; and God's forgiveness, love and hope.

I encourage you this day to incorporate these spiritual values into your heart and soul, treasure them in your own life and consider ways to share them with those who come after you, those who are watching, those who are listening to **your** words of witness. To God alone be the glory! AMEN.

Let us pray:

Lord God, we thank You for the treasure of those who've gone before us. We thank You for their words of witness to us. And we pray that we would hear and consider their words. That we would consider our own values and what we want to pass on to our children and grandchildren. Help us to be aware that all those with whom we come into contact are listening and watching. And help us to pass on that which is most cherished to us, always for Your glory. Amen.

APPENDIX 7: INITIAL QUESTIONNAIRE

Initial Questionnaire

Thesis Overview: Will preaching the Witness of Last Words from the Biblical account influence the way contemporary listeners consider their own spiritual legacy? As sermon-hearers listen in on the last words of some biblical giants (who distilled their lifelong learning and experiences and shaped them into brief speeches) will they take to heart the spiritual legacy they would like to pass on to their children and grandchildren? These are the questions I will explore in the preaching of six sermons as part of my doctoral thesis: *Preaching the Witness of Last Words: How Biblical Farewell Speeches Shape Contemporary Listeners' Theological Legacy*.

Date of Birth (Month/Day): _____ Gender (M/F)

Please complete the following

1. On a scale of 1-10, how thoroughly have you thought through your own core theological convictions (the aspects of your faith you value most)? (1: Not at all; 10: I've thoroughly thought through these matters) _____
2. On a scale of 1-10, how thoroughly have you thought through the theological legacy you would like to leave? (1: Not at all; 10: I've thoroughly considered my theological legacy) _____
3. On a scale of 1-10, how satisfied are you in your effectiveness of having shared your theological legacy? (1: I feel like I've failed in this respect; 10: I'm completely at peace in this respect, having fully shared my theological legacy with those most cherished to me.) _____
4. On a scale of 1-10 **how much do you value** the following, with respect to your thinking about your theological legacy (1: Not at all; 10: highest value):

- a. Forgiveness (receiving forgiveness from God and forgiving others) ____
- b. God's faithfulness (to you and to all of creation) ____
- c. Gratitude (for all that God has done) ____
- d. Love (received from God and extended to others) ____
- e. Hope (for this life and confidence in God's eternal promises) ____
- f. Dedication & Service (commitment to follow in Jesus' steps) ____

APPENDIX 8: SURVEY #1

Survey for Sermon #1: God's Faithfulness

Thesis Overview: Will preaching the Witness of Last Words from the Biblical account influence the way contemporary listeners consider their own spiritual legacy? As sermon-hearers listen in on the last words of some biblical giants (who distilled their lifelong learning and experiences and shaped them into brief speeches) will they take to heart the spiritual legacy they would like to pass on to their children and grandchildren? These are the questions I will explore in the preaching of six sermons as part of my doctoral thesis: *Preaching the Witness of Last Words: How Biblical Farewell Speeches Shape Contemporary Listeners' Theological Legacy*.

Date of Birth (Month/Day): _____ Gender (M/F)

Please complete the following:

1. On a scale of 1-10, how thoroughly have you thought through your own core theological convictions (the aspects of your faith that you value most)? (1: Not at all; 10: I've thoroughly thought through these matters) ____
2. On a scale of 1-10, how thoroughly have you thought through the theological legacy you would like to leave? (1: Not at all; 10: I've thoroughly considered my theological legacy) ____
3. On a scale of 1-10, how satisfied are you in your effectiveness of having shared your theological legacy? (1: I feel like I've failed in this respect; 10: I'm completely at peace in this respect, having fully shared my theological legacy with those most cherished to me.) ____
4. On a scale of 1-10, to what extent did **this sermon** help you think through your core theological convictions? (1: Not at all; 10: More than ever before!) ____

5. On a scale of 1-10, to what extent did **this sermon** help you think through the theological legacy you would like to leave? (1: Not at all; 10: It revitalized my thinking) ____
6. On a scale of 1-10, to what extent did **this sermon** motivate you to share your theological legacy with those most cherished to you? (1: Not at all; 10: I can't wait to share it!) ____
7. On a scale of 1-10 how much do you value **God's faithfulness** (to you and to all of creation) with respect to your thinking about your theological legacy (1: Not at all; 10: highest value): ____

APPENDIX 9: LAST WORDS PASSAGES

IN BIBLICAL ORDER:

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Joshua 24:1-13; 14-24

I Kings 2:1-12

Ezekiel 47:1-12

Matthew 26:6-13

Luke 23:32-34a

John 13:1-17

John 14:1-3

John 19:25-27

John 21:15-22

Acts 7:51-60

Acts 20:17-38

Philippians 1:3-11

2 Thessalonians 3:1-5

2 Timothy 2:13; 4:3-5

2 John 4-6

Revelation 22:1-6a

GROUPED ACCORDING TO TOPIC:

Faithfulness: Joshua 24:1-13; John 19:25-27; 2 Thessalonians 3:1-5;

2 Timothy 2:13; 4:3-5

Gratitude: Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Matthew 26:6-13; Philippians 1:3-11

Commitment, Dedication & Service: Joshua 24:14-24, John 21:15-22;

Acts 20:17-38

Forgiveness: I Kings 2:1-12; Luke 23:32-34a; Acts 7:51-60

Love: Deuteronomy 6:4-9; John 13:1-17; 2 John 4-6

Hope: Ezekiel 47:1-12; John 14:1-3; Revelation 22:1-6a

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