

“A Final Word”
Matthew 7:12; 8:1-4; Isaiah 1:10-17
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I. Introduction

Oil and water.....personally and politically that was Winston Churchill and Lady Astor. Churchill was the rough, tough and often course Prime Minister England needed during WWII. Lady Astor was an American expatriate from the upper classes, prudish, religiously conservative, and a very liberal member of the English Parliament. Both were witty, and often their bickering and battles were played out in the public sphere....both wanting the last word.

In one such occasion Churchill so angered Lady Astor that she said, “If I were your wife, I’d put arsenic in your tea.” Churchill immediately replied, “And if I were your husband, I’d gladly drink it.” Churchill got the last word that day.

The last word....in a book it’s the epilogue. It can be a summary of what has come before, or a further reflection on what has been written. It’s the word that comes after, “the end.”

The final word....three Sundays ago I thought I had come to the end of our summer sermon series on the Sermon on the Mount. I was to be gone for a couple Sundays, Rev. Maloney was to preach, and our summer schedule was drawing to a close. But then I discovered this final Sunday before our fall schedule. So I’m going to go back to the Sermon on the Mount, and share a final word after I preached “the end” a few weeks ago; a final word to this sermon series, and a final word to our summer worship schedule. Perhaps it’s a type of epilogue.

II. Text

The text this morning is one verse from the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 7:12, and then Matthew 8:1-4. **Read Mt. 7:12 and 8:1-4.**

III. Brief Exegesis

Seven hundred years before Jesus the prophet Isaiah had shared an important word, a final word, from God. Israel’s religion was the problem. As God’s people they were to show a different way of life. The Ten Commandments and the other laws were gifts to direct them in a different way of life with God, and with each other. But year after year they failed, and even worse, they thought they were doing fine. They were busy in the temple, busy with sacrifices, busy with celebrating the holy days, busy with

ceremony, worship and prayers, and busy looking religious. But they failed in their relationships with each other.

Specifically, their moral and ethical lives were a mess. Wealth and power had corrupted those who held it, and the poor and powerless were the victims. It's the same story in every age. Justice was twisted, as often happens. And this matters to God. As God's people they were to be different than other cultures around them. But they weren't. They had a chance to change. But they didn't. So God's judgment came. Israel fell to the Babylonians. Their nation was gone.....their king was gone.....their temple, and priesthood and religious busyness.....it was all gone.

As exiles in Babylon they would have time to reflect on this.....and they did. They saw their mistakes. They looked back and heard the truth of God in Isaiah. And they discovered the final word of God was not judgment, but grace. They returned to the land. A new temple was built. A new priesthood started to serve. They were busy again with worship, prayers, sacrifices and holy days. And once again they failed in their relationships with each other.

In time another word came from God. This time, instead of Isaiah, the word came from Jesus of Nazareth. The word was the Sermon on the Mount. It is a word on how to live in relationship with God, and with each other. And as Jesus' sermon draws to a close, there is a final word.....a word after "the end:" **In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets. (Mt. 7:12)**

This final word, called "The Golden Rule," is not unique to Jesus. With variations it is also found in Jewish and non-Jewish literature. In fact, a Jewish rabbi named Hillel, a contemporary of Jesus, is reported to have said to a Gentile inquirer, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor; that is the whole law, while the rest is commentary thereon; go and learn it." I don't find anything troublesome about the Golden Rule not being attributable to Jesus. Truth is truth, from wherever it comes. Jesus probably heard the Golden Rule, understood its truth, and made it a part of his own teaching.

I also don't think it really matters if the Golden Rule is stated positively ("Do unto others as you would have them do to you"), or negatively ("Don't do unto others what you don't want done to you.") Both have strengths and weakness. The big idea is to use our own experience in life, what we like and don't like, in decisions on how to treat others.

"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." After the whole Sermon on the Mount this is, indeed, a final word. For 2 ½ chapters Jesus has been teaching about how to be the people of God, with special emphasis on how to care for each other ("Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you," "Don't practice

your piety before others so to be noticed by them,” “Don’t judge.”) And now, at the end, he gives a summary of all that he has taught, a final word; **“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”**

The Golden Rule also frees Jesus’ followers from the reign of religious experts. In Jesus’ day there were 613 Old Testament laws the leaders said needed to be followed. Who could know and follow all those? People were often told to go to the experts, the teachers and rabbis, to know what to do. Or, told they were unholy, outside the people of God, judged and excluded from God’s people, because they failed this or that law.

But Jesus frees anxious followers from that system, and gives them a simple standard. They need not consult the experts, but need only consult themselves. They need to only consult their own feelings: “How would I like to be treated in this situation?” “I don’t like to be the subject of gossip, so I won’t gossip.” “I make mistakes and would like forgiveness to be offered to me, so I’ll forgive.” “I would like people to welcome me as a stranger, so I’ll welcome that person I don’t know.” Ethical standards for relationships move from numerous laws on many pages I can’t know and do, to one law in the heart I can know and do.

Finally, as soon as Jesus completes this sermon, he’s out showing how it’s done. A leper approaches Jesus. The man suffers with his disease, and suffers because he must live outside any community with his disease, and suffers with guilt, because it was believed his disease is a result of sin (“He must have done something to be stricken like that.”) **“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”** So he is healed by Jesus, restored to his community, and knows that grace is greater than any guilt, real or imagined.

And so Jesus will continue to live into the Golden Rule; healing the broken, welcoming the outcast, forgiving the guilty, and sharing with the poor. **“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”** Jesus does it, and invites his followers to the same way of life.

IV. Reflection

For 4 years I have mentored a small group of Presbyterian pastors. Somehow the years have gone by and I’ve passed from the age of “mentoree” to mentor (I’m not so sure I’m pleased about that.) Twice a year I’ve met with this small group of Presbyterian pastors in 3-4 day retreats. We’ve read books and written papers. We’ve prayed for and with each other, met each other’s families, and become friends. We’ve talked about ministry over the phone, via email, and in person. Ministry is difficult now, as the Presbyterian Church (USA) discovered that about 50% of Presbyterian clergy

drop out of ministry after 5 years. They've also discovered that meeting as a small group in regular retreats, practicing spiritual disciplines, and having a mentor makes a difference.

I was recently out in California for our last time together. The denomination "made good" on their promise to have the final gathering at a nice retreat center, and include spouses. So there we were at the Serra Retreat Center, a Franciscan retreat center, in Malibu, CA, overlooking the Pacific Ocean, our last time together.

And the last thing we did at that retreat was share a worship service and communion together. It was good.....a fitting conclusion to a 4 year ministry journey. Sitting there I was thankful for the experience, and for the younger pastors who had become my friends. I was thankful for their growth, and thankful for the growth in my own life and ministry. And then I found myself wondering if it had really made a difference? Had the books, papers, discussions, prayers, planning, sharing, leading and caring really made a difference? Had the sharing of my life and ministry really mattered?

As we were leaving the retreat center to come home, one of the younger pastors, Skye, gave me a card. With suitcases in hand I didn't have time to open it, so I stuck it in my brief case. On the plane I remembered the card, and opened it. It was a final word after "the end" of the retreat. The notes inside of the card from the pastor's were nice and encouraging. But it was the words on the outside of the card that especially caught my attention. They were the words that answered my questions.....and the words that I most needed to hear at that time. The front of the card said, "The good you do is not lost though you forget it."

As I shared the card with Jeanne, I thought about those words. That is, indeed, the great hope (isn't it?). In a life of busy calendars, events, people and places.....when faces and stories become fuzzy, and in time forgotten.....the good we do is forgotten in time, but never lost. It is the hope as we pour ourselves into the lives of our children and grandchildren, our friends, causes that really matter, works of good and beauty, our church, and following Jesus' way of life....."The good you do is not lost though you forget it."

That was the final word of the mentoring experience for me.....long after the good-byes, on the plane ride home. And in some strange and wonderful way it is also an expression of the Golden Rule; the care I extended for 4 years that I would have liked to received, now comes back to me in a simple card with the perfect words.....God's words for my life. I'll keep the card with a few of my other holy relics; simple things that have been given in love that sustain my ministry in the difficult days. And I hope to do the same for others; good, though perhaps forgotten, but never lost.