

into the wilderness. He often made a quick exit from crowds to get away on a retreat. He left the Last Supper to go to Gethsemane to pray. And then the big exit. He died. On a cross. A few sympathizers took his body and put it in a tomb. He was dead and entombed. The final exit. Cue the lights. Drop the curtain. Roll the credits. Game over. End of story.

Not quite. Jesus reappears and spends some time with his disciples and then exits again. Into the clouds. Poof. Gone. And the Bible says he now sits at the right hand of the Father. As for exit lines, Jesus had a few of those, too. There are the so-called "seven last words" of Christ on the cross. There is his post-resurrection exit line recorded in Matthew's gospel, "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (28:20).

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

Soon after Jesus enters Jerusalem for the Passover festival, some Greeks approach the disciple Philip and say to him, "*Sir, we wish to see Jesus*" (v. 21). Philip relays their words to Andrew, and then the two of them take the request to Jesus. He tells them - in so many words - that he will die soon, and then he compares himself to a seed. "*Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit*" (v. 24).

These Greeks have grown up with Aesop's fables, so they know the power of a simple story to teach a moral lesson. But in case they do not get his point, Jesus goes on to say, "*Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life*" (v. 25). In other words, although death is very close for Jesus, he tells the disciples that his own literal death is a metaphor for understanding how his followers must live every day: they must live by dying. When they do, like a seed in the ground, they will grow and bear fruit.

You can certainly understand the confusion of the Greeks. They know that the dead tend to stay dead, but Jesus is telling them that fruitfulness comes from going into the ground, and a loss of life leads to eternal life. And then he drops this exit line: "*And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself*" (v. 32). When he is lifted up on the cross, he will not repel people. Instead, he will draw people.

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

For some, however, the cross is both metaphorical and literal. Think back to the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Memphis, Tennessee. On April 4, 1968. On the night before his death, he gave a speech in which he said, "Like anybody, I would like to live a long life - longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over, and I've seen the Promised Land."

King's "mountaintop" speech contained some powerful truths about his life and about the Civil Rights movement. He delivered a vision of the Promised Land that continues to inspire people today. We are still on the path to that Promised Land, as we work for racial reconciliation and try to fight racism wherever we see it, in ourselves and in our communities. King's death did not kill his efforts for justice, but instead it gave life to a movement that is bigger now than it has ever been. "I've seen the Promised Land," said King. "I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land." He was right. He went into the earth like a grain of wheat, and his efforts have borne much fruit.

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

Here's an example of a metaphorical death, not a literal one. A couple of years ago, baseball player Adam LaRoche walked away from a \$13 million contract with the Chicago White Sox. He wanted his son to spend a lot of time with him and the team, but the team's management did not agree. He announced his retirement on Twitter, thanking God for the game of baseball and ending with the hashtag #FamilyFirst. Fellow players responded by commending LaRoche for "standing up for his beliefs." One said, "Nothing like father and son in the clubhouse. It's a family game."

In this death, a baseball player "dies" to the temptation to put the god of money and financial reward ahead of his core values. LaRoche is a Christian who once asked himself the question: "What do you want written on your tombstone? Do you want 'Adam LaRoche: Gold Glove, batting average, hit so many homers, and has a million dollars in his bank account,' or do you want 'Adam LaRoche: Man of God, integrity, raised a great family, loving.' Let's be honest: I don't know anybody who wants their stats."

LaRoche is living by dying. He "puts to death" his natural desire for fame and money. What he gets is richly rewarding: fruitfulness and a life of meaning and significance. You might say that it was easy for him to do this because he already had millions in the bank. Maybe. But how much money you have doesn't deliver you from the demon of greed.

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

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

Prayer: Merciful God, You call us to follow; to turn away from our own selfish interests, and to take up our cross and follow after You, even if the path is difficult to see, or is heading in a direction we would never have chosen for ourselves. Forgive us for being so quick to question and so hesitant to follow. Help us to see with the eyes of faith, rather than from our own human point of view. Teach us to follow without fear, knowing that You are always with us, leading the way. Amen.

Sources:

- "Adam LaRoche retired over White Sox's request to limit son in clubhouse." *ESPN*, March 17, 2016, espn.com.
- "Remembering MLK's prophetic 'Mountaintop' speech." *NPR*, April 3, 2008, npr.org.
- "The Big Question: What is the best exit of all time?" *The Atlantic*, June 2017, 96; July/August 2017, 12.

Exit Lines

Sunday, March 18, 2017

John 12:20-33

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

What is the best exit or exit line of all time? It's an interesting question, because we all want our last words and actions to be memorable. Drawing on recent history, I'll mention Richard Nixon's concession speech on November 7, 1962, after losing the California governorship to Pat Brown. Nixon addressed a crowd of reporters at the Beverly Hilton Hotel and gave vent to the bitterness of that campaign. He castigated the media, saying, "You won't have Nixon to kick around anymore, because, gentlemen, this is my last press conference." Although Nixon, and much of America, thought this was Nixon's exit line, he made a remarkable comeback, and winning the presidency in 1968.

Gen. Douglas MacArthur delivered another famous exit line on his retirement from public life with the observation to Congress that "old soldiers never die; they just fade away."

Then there's baseball player Lou Gehrig's farewell speech on July 4, 1939, when Gehrig told the Yankee faithful that, despite recent health issues, he considered himself to be "the luckiest man on the face of the Earth." That was the last day Gehrig wore a baseball uniform: he died two years later.

Finally, I'll mention Randy Pausch, professor of computer science, human-computer interaction, and design at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) in Pittsburgh, who died of pancreatic cancer at age 47. About a year before he died, Pausch delivered an upbeat lecture called *The Last Lecture: Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams*, which became a popular YouTube video and later a best-selling book. In his lecture, Pausch commented that if he only had three words of advice, "I'd say, 'Tell the truth.' If I had three more words, I'd add 'All the time.'"

His last lecture was an amazing exit and an equally inspiring exit "line" or lines.

In the religious category, one source says that Jesus, Muhammad and Buddha are tied for the best exit of all time. But, personally, I think Jesus' exit was the most dramatic. And you might say that he had more than one exit: Jesus made a habit of leaving during his short ministry of three years. He makes an astonishing appearance at the Jordan River where his cousin John is baptizing people. After John baptizes Jesus, he disappears for 40 days