

## Linda Ryan

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**From:** Linda Ryan  
**Sent:** Monday, June 06, 2005 10:57 AM  
**To:** Bev McGee  
**Subject:** Last Words First

**May 22, 2005**  
**Psalm 8, Matthew 28:16-20**  
**Dr. Lewis Galloway**

**“Last Words First”**

Some years ago at a Campus Ministry program, the chaplain invited faculty members to be a part of a last lecture series. Each participant was invited to respond to the question, “If you had only one last lecture to give, what would you say?” A physicist spoke about the mystery of God’s creation, from a scientist’s perspective. The college president used Flannery O’Connor’s story *Revelation* and Shakespeare’s *King Lear* to speak about how literature has the power to see the painful but liberating truth of life. A law professor spoke about the human spirit and the struggle for justice. These wise teachers shared their deepest convictions about faith and life.

At the end of the gospel of Matthew, we hear Jesus give his parting words to the disciples who have gathered on a mountain in Galilee. He assures them that God has given to him all authority in heaven and on earth. What he is saying is not a whim, a personal fantasy or some obscure directive. His words are connected with the deepest intentions of God for creation. In Colossians, Paul says that in Jesus Christ “all things in heaven and on earth were created... For in him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and through him God was pleased to reconcile all things to God’s own self, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.” (Col. 1:16, 19, 20) In the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God has established and revealed creation’s destiny.

Jesus said, “Go into all the world.” We can’t make disciples without encountering others in the name of Christ. We can’t make disciples if we are all “holed up” in our dens, our habits or our comfortable ways of doing things with our familiar friends. Some years ago, I got to know the Henry Brinton, the pastor in a Presbyterian Church in the Washington, D.C. area and a religious affairs writer for *The Washington Post*. Henry and I attended a seminar in Brazil on evangelism sponsored by Outreach Foundation. In an article he wrote after our trip, Brinton posed the question, “What makes dynamic churches and builds vital congregational life?” He received a clear answer to his question during the course of our trip to Brazil as we visited a variety of congregations. A vital church has an “outward orientation,” which means it “looks first to those broader needs [of the larger community] and elevates Christian mission above institutional maintenance.” (“Churches Need to Get Outside of Themselves,” *The Washington Post*, Sunday, April 21, 2002, p. B-5). He noted with sadness how many congregations in North America look inward and direct their energy toward preserving themselves and the cultural traditions of their church. By adhering to what have often been called the seven last words of the church, “We’ve never done it that way before,” the church fails to go beyond itself and carry out Christ’s mission in the world. A strong and vital church has a clear sense

of mission to the people and to the world around it.

The first disciples took the gospel of Jesus from Judea to Samaria and from Samaria into all of the world. Along the way, they had some hard experiences and unexpected joys. At every step, the Holy Spirit gave them the strength, understanding and courage to go on. For many years, the American protestant church thought of evangelism primarily as giving money to support the work of missionaries sent by our General Assembly to foreign countries. As a congregation we support our missionaries in Ethiopia, India, Africa and Latin America. Indeed, giving to foreign missions is essential to the larger outreach of the Presbyterian Church.

In more recent years, we have come to understand the commission of Jesus in some additional ways. In his book, *The Once and Future Church*, author Loren Mead claims that since the end of the World War II, a new understanding of the “ministry of the laity” has developed. The outreach and evangelistic ministries of the church are not only something to which we give our money so that others may go in our name. All of us are “ministers of the gospel.” All of us are sent by Jesus into the world to proclaim, to teach, to give, to heal, and to work for peace. Many of our members have gone to other countries such as Kenya, Zambia, Mexico, Nicaragua and Honduras. This summer members of our church will go on mission trips to Georgia, West Virginia and Mexico.

Mead also takes note of a second shift that has happened in the local church’s understanding of the Great Commission: the world begins at the front door of the church. The mission field is not only across the ocean but also across the street. As we feed the hungry through Loaves and Fishes, tutor children at Westminster Neighborhood Ministries, provide support for divorced parents and their children in our New Day program, work in health clinics, build homes for Habitat and volunteer at the hospitals, we are carrying out the Great Commission of Jesus.

Jesus said, “Make disciples of all nations.” When God called Abraham to leave his kinfolk and his country, God said that Abraham would be a blessing to all the nations of the earth. Abraham could not have known that God would fulfill that promise in the mission of the church. We hear Jesus sending the disciples into the world to make disciples. In Jesus, God’s promise to Abraham comes full circle. Everyone is invited to become a disciple of Jesus Christ.

The central mission of the church is to make disciples. The Greek word for disciple means a student, or a follower of a particular teacher. In addition to this inner circle of the 11, there were many followers of Jesus who sat at his feet. In his book *Transforming Congregational Culture*, which a number of our staff and members have read, Anthony Robinson reminds us that the purpose of the church is “human transformation. Our purpose is to change lives.” (p.33) Robinson states, “In other words, people increasingly come to the church looking for change, for transformation, for healing, for a life that is deeper and more adventuresome than what they have found in the culture, where a kind of nihilism is covered over but not cured by affluence.” (p.34)

What the church offers is the invitation to become a follower of Jesus Christ. To be a disciple is to follow Jesus. It is to let the pattern of his life become the pattern of our lives. In his article, “Rethinking the Great Commission,” Mortimer Arias, the Bishop Emeritus of the Bolivian Methodist Church, has written, “Jesus’ disciples were trained...in the right way of doing, living, and dying... Discipleship in the Kingdom is not merely obeying a commandment but following a person.” (*Theology Today*, Vol. 47, No.4, Jan. 1991, p. 412.) As Jesus called others to faith, we share the gospel. As Jesus showed compassion, we act compassionately towards others. As Jesus forgave, we forgive. As Jesus worked for justice by lifting up the poor, the outcast, and downtrodden, we care

for those who have no one else to care for them. We cannot be disciples of Jesus and “do our own thing,” hoard our money, squander our time, shop ourselves to death, pollute the earth, care only about ourselves or drink our way into oblivion.

The way we make disciples is by baptizing and teaching. Baptism is the first step in a life-long process. This spring we baptized twelve new disciples of Jesus Christ who were a part of our fifty-one-member confirmation class. Each month parents present their children for baptism and, as a congregation, we join with these parents in promising to raise these children in the faith. In June, we will baptize new Christians who have come to faith in Jesus Christ and have participated in our discipleship program called the Search. Whether we baptize others as children, youth or adults, we are being faithful to Jesus’ command to make disciples.

We know that baptism is not the end of a process but the beginning of a spiritual journey that lasts our whole life. Therefore, we teach those whom we baptize. We provide spiritual nurture for the children and youth of our church through the Sunday school program, children’s choir school, prayers and honest conversations at home, vacation Bible school, mission trips and service opportunities. In three weeks, 24 of our graduating high school seniors will be traveling in the footsteps of Paul on a trip to Turkey, Greece and Rome as they explore their own calling to follow Jesus. We want our youth to be spiritually prepared for to make the best of the wonderful opportunities they will have in college and in their careers.

Spiritual growth never ends. Bishop Mortimer Arias has written, “Christian education is the evangelization of each new generation, learning the way of the Kingdom at each stage of life and through all human experiences. Disciples are made, not born, and that means that the church must engage in discipleship through the whole of life, with no graduation day in sight!” (“Rethinking the Great Commission,” p. 412).

The Search Committee for our associate for Adult Education or Theologian-in-Residence is seeking a person who will not only be a master teacher but who will equip members of our church to teach others Bible, theology and Christian life. I pray that God will lead us to someone who will help us develop a broad range of small group ministries and also develop a lay school of theology. Jesus calls us to reach out to those who do not yet know his love and grace and to welcome them into the fellowship of the church. The last words of Jesus are a call to each one of us to share our faith with others. Making disciples means teaching one another how to practice in the daily life of the love of God and the love of neighbor.

We could not accept this commission from Jesus if it were not for the final promise: “Remember I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” What Jesus asks us to do would be impossible if he were not with us every step of the way? He gives us the word to speak when we are tongue-tied and stammering. He renews us when we are worn down. He picks us up when we fail. He teaches us to laugh at ourselves when we take ourselves too seriously. He nudges us to take risks. He meets us in the stranger. He fills us when we are empty. He is the Risen Lord who is always with us leading us into the Kingdom.

The last words of Jesus speak of the things that come first in life. Jesus gathers all us here today to equip us to be his witnesses. Then he sends us out so that the world may know his grace and truth. When you leave this sanctuary and cross the threshold into the world outside, remember that you have entered the world that God so loves and where we are called to tell the good news. The world begins right outside that door.