

In your opinion, what do you think is the best exit and/or exit line of all time? Perhaps your first thought involves what happened after the Watergate scandal. On August 8, 1974, former President Nixon resigned from his duties as POTUS. The final words of his speech on that occasion were: "To have served in this office is to have felt a very personal sense of kinship with each and every American. In leaving it, I do so with this prayer: May God's grace be with you in all the days ahead."

Maybe as you were brain storming an exit line you were able to recall Gen. Douglas MacArthur's retirement from public life with his observation to Congress that "old soldiers never die; they just fade away." Or if you're a big fan of baseball you might mention Lou Gehrig's farewell speech. On July 4, 1939, Gehrig stood in front of the podium, speaking to the Yankee faithful, proclaiming despite his recent health issues that he considered himself to be "the luckiest man on the face of the Earth." That was the last day Gehrig would ever wear a baseball uniform again, as what is known today as Lou Gehrig's disease claimed his life two years later.

In the religious category, you might say that three leaders are tied for the best exit of all time: Jesus, Muhammad and Buddha. You have to give them credit for the religions they founded, especially since more than 4 billion people count themselves as belonging to one of those individuals. As followers of Christ, we would probably mention that Jesus' exit was certainly the most dramatic. And we might even say that he had more than one.

Jesus seemed to make it a habit of leaving, at certain times, 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 into the wilderness. He often made a quick exit from crowds to get away for a personal retreat with his Heavenly father and sometimes with his

students. He left the Last Supper to go to Gethsemane to pray. And then the big, dramatic, tragic exit....He died on a cross.

A few sympathizers got his lifeless body, anointed it, put it in a tomb, and a stone was rolled in front of it by some Roman guards. And was that his final exit? Was it? No, three days later he reappears and spends some time with his disciples and then exits again. In fact, if we want to observe his final curtain call, we need to open our Bibles to the first chapter of Acts 1, where he rises up into the clouds and poof he is gone, off to take his rightful seat at the right hand of God.

As for exit lines, Jesus had a few of those, too. Of course, we might refer to the "seven last words" of Christ on the cross. "Into thy hands I commend my Spirit!" or we might chose to mention Jesus' post-resurrection exit line recorded as the last words of Matthew's gospel, "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age!" So Jesus not only had a fabulous exit or exits, he had more than a few good last words, or lines, for us as well. One of these lines, spoken only days before his death, is found in today's Gospel lesson. "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."

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!" 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."

These Greeks who want to meet Jesus 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 will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. 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. And when they do so, like a seed in the ground, they will grow and bear fruit.

Of course, we can certainly understand the confusion of the Greeks in our story this morning. Oftentimes we hear these words and don't always fully understand them either. Like us, they know that the dead tend to stay dead. But Jesus is telling his Greek guests, and his followers that; fruitfulness comes from going into the ground, and a loss of life leads to eternal life. And then he drops his exit line: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." In other words, when Jesus is lifted up on the cross, he will not repel people. Instead, he will attract people, draw people to himself.

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

For an example, we need only turn to an event that happened nearly 52 years ago in Memphis, Tennessee. On April 4, 1968, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. On the night before his death, he gave a speech in which he said, "Like anybody, I would like to live a long life -- longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over, and I've seen the Promised Land."

That was King's "mountaintop" speech, and it contained some powerful truths about his life and about the Civil Rights movement. He was right to say that "longevity has its place," and it would have been marvelous if he had been able to live out his life and die peacefully. But at the same time, he delivered a vision of

the Promised Land that continues to inspire people even to this day. 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. 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 will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." Those who love life are typically 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 *You'll be there* by George Strait declares, "I ain't never seen a hearse with a luggage rack."

Let me offer up just one other example: This time it's an example of a metaphorical death, not a literal one. In this death, a baseball player "dies" to the temptation to put "the god of money and financial reward" ahead of his core values. Which begs the question, can we do that? Can we work at putting to death some of our earthly hang-ups, and the worldly desires we possess, that can keep us from bearing fruit and from truly experiencing an abundant life in Christ?

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

Fellow players responded by commending LaRoche for "standing up for his beliefs." One said, "There's nothing like a father and son in the clubhouse. It's a family game." LaRoche is a Christian who once asked himself the question: "What do I want written on my tombstone? Do I want 'Adam LaRoche: Golden Glove

winner, batting average, hit so many homers, and has a million dollars in his bank account,” or do I want “Adam LaRoche: Man of God, integrity, raised a great family, was truly a loving person.” He chose the latter and “put to death” his natural desire for fame and fortune. What he received was, and continues to be, richly rewarding: fruitfulness and a life of meaning and significance.

Of course, some might say that it was easy for him to do this because perhaps he already had earned millions and had stashed it away. Maybe...but how much money you have doesn't deliver you from sin, death, or an everlasting torment in the fires of hell. 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! They saw the cross as a scandalous death and as a humiliating defeat. As the apostle Paul said to the Corinthians, "Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified!

We Christians proclaim Christ crucified, because we know that the cross is the clearest sign of just how far Jesus was willing to 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 and sacrificial servanthood. Such a life is powerfully attractive, and we can't deny that people continue to be drawn by the power of the cross. So let's follow where it leads us, toward fruitful service and eternal life!