

**Sermon, June 1, 2025**  
**"The Last Word"**  
**Seventh Sunday of Easter**  
**Delivered by Rev. John Balicki**  
**St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Wilton, Maine**

*His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.*

-James Joyce, "The Dead" the final short story in the Dubliners (1914)

*He was soon borne away by the waves and lost in darkness and distance.*

-Mary Shelley, Frankenstein (1818)

*But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.*

-George Eliot, Middlemarch (1871-72)

*The knife came down, missing him by inches, and he took off.*

-Joseph Heller, Catch-22 (1961)

*So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.*

-F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby (1925)

*But I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me and I can't stand it. I been there before.*

-Mark Twain, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1885)

*And so, as Tiny Tim observed, God bless Us, Every One!*

-Charles Dickens, A Christmas Carol (1843)

I mean let's give our English majors some love here. These are some of the most famous last sentences from great literature. Perhaps you recognized one or two or have your own favorites. Don't we all love a good ending? Especially if we've really been enjoying a book, even if we mostly know how it's going to turn out? How well the ending is written is what will stay with us. So wouldn't you think we would know the last sentence of the most widely read book in the world?

Well confession time. I didn't. Would have been a failure if it came up as a Jeopardy question. But there it is – at the end of our epistle from the Book of Revelation, “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen”. Now unlike the authors listed above, the author of the Book of Revelation didn't know it would be the last sentence in the Bible. That author didn't even know there would be something called a Bible. That author was just writing one book.

In essence there are really 81 final lines in the Bible because the Bible is a mini-library of 81 books, written mainly in Hebrew and Greek by about 55 authors across more than a thousand years. It's long, has many plot twists, and is rooted in ancient cultural settings that are foreign to us today. So can we like our authors above who wrote a unified work try to make a concluding point with a final sentence? Can we reduce its myriad complexities to an essential substance that clarifies and enlightens rather than reduces and oversimplifies?

Yes. The last sentence of the Bible does exactly that: "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen".

Now before we unpack this one really great last sentence, let's deal with a bit of a textual problem, not to get too wonky. Our translation as well as others narrows God's grace to “God's people” or to “the saints” as the translation we heard this morning from the New Revised Standard version states. But let me defer to biblical scholar Brian Peterson who notes that other translations use the term “all” which is included as a footnote in most translations.

*The shorter reading (meaning to “all”) is probably the more original. Later scribes apparently found such grace problematically broad and so tried to limit it to the church. However, “to all” is a fitting final declaration for this book: God reaches out not just to the church, but to all the world, graciously beckoning all into the New Jerusalem. Everything that John has seen and shown, in the end, is God's grace. In this book, as in all our lives, God's grace is both beginning (1:4) and ending (22:21).*

That feels better to me. We've discussed that word “all” in a couple of sermons this Easter Season. And we made one of those promises again today,

“Will you strive for justice and peace among **all** people, and respect the dignity of **every** human being? Well that didn't leave anyone out did it as much as at times we hope it might. And we had another pretty good last sentence today as well. The end of the seventeenth chapter of John's gospel comes at the end of a long speech at the Last Supper. We've been hearing from that speech for our gospels these last four Sundays.

After this sentence, Jesus goes off to be crucified. And what's that final sentence? "I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them". Sounds a lot like the "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all".

And why is this last sentence so important? Because too often through Christian history, and it's certainly true today as well, attempts have been made to parcel out God's grace only to certain people, certainly not everyone, a judgmentalism of others that is eager to exclude people unlike ourselves. So we can go from one final sentence of the Bible to one final word: grace.

And what is this grace that sums up the book? This grace is best described in the actions of the person of whom it's about, our main character, Jesus the Christ, and the God he came to reveal.

The God whom Jesus revealed isn't mean or scary, and if we reflect his image people need not fear his followers. Rather, said Jesus, he's the sort of God who throws a party for a kid who wasted the family fortune, who refuses to condemn a woman caught in the act of adultery, who breaks taboos of ethnicity and gender to encourage a woman who had been married five times, who welcomes a criminal into his kingdom as the man gasps for breath while being executed, and who embraces his closest disciples even though they abandoned him and denied ever knowing him.

It's a grace described in the Easter sermon of Pere Henri in the movie "Chocolat" and oh if only more priests would say this:

*I want to talk about Christ's humanity, I mean how he lived his life on earth: his kindness, his tolerance. We must measure our goodness, not by what we don't do, what we deny ourselves, what we resist, or who we exclude. Instead, we should measure ourselves by what we embrace, what we create, and who we include.*

And so the last page of the Bible invites everyone with these welcoming words: "Let him who hears say, 'Come!' Whoever is thirsty let her come; and whoever wishes, let them take the free gift of the water of life". Grace abounds to all. Come!