

## **Famous Last Words**

### **John 13:31-35**

When he had gone out, Jesus said,

“Now the Son of Man has been glorified,  
and God has been glorified in him.

If God has been glorified in him,

God will also glorify him in himself  
and will glorify him at once.

Little children, I am with you only a little longer.

You will look for me;

and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you,  
‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.

Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples,  
if you have love for one another.”

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John 13:31-35

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### **I.**

You will have to forgive me today if I end up being a little *too* straightforward. Moreover, if present results are predictive of future performance, my guess is you will have to be prepared to offer even more forgiveness over the course of the next few years.

Last Sunday I shared with you that among my greatest delights as a minister is visiting a just-born child and their parents. The same is true for having the privilege of Baptizing a child and welcoming them into the body of Christ and this family of faith, as we have done this morning with young Finley Ladison. Let the little children come unto us, indeed. Down through the ages, Baptism has always been a very big deal, but particularly so in the first few decades of the church when the practice came to both signal and symbolize one's faith in this Jesus of Nazareth character as the long awaited Messiah and Savior. While no one comes to the Father except through the Son, no one came to the Church except through Baptism.

### **II.**

Another of my great delights as minister here at the Church on the Park is the monthly worship service at the place formerly known as Partridge Knoll (PK). Beyond the ability of continuing to weave the thread of relationship with a good number of beloved parishioners who make their home there, it is always an interesting experience owing to their station in life, and the accumulated wisdom they so graciously share with me. They keep me grounded theologically, and practiced in my pastoral skills.

When we met Wednesday I used today's sermon text from John as the basis for my homily with them. This is my usual practice as it serves to give me a jump on the Sunday sermon. Not so this week, however, as I began by saying to them I have *no* idea which direction to go with it. Nevertheless, I went right ahead and talked about a couple of things anyway. After the service, I realized what I had said might make a decent sermon. The proof, though, is in the pudding.

### III.

I began by telling them about a mental exercise (fantasy) to which I frequently give myself over. That is, imagining myself back at Princeton Theological Seminary offering a one hour crash course to any who wish to attend on what parish ministry is *really* like. The points I envision myself presenting range from the practical to the theological.

Schedule 30 hrs. a week so you don't end up working more than 50; things always pop up if you are doing your job correctly, be flexible. Block ten of those hours for sermon writing. Theological astuteness and scriptural insight might come quickly, but there are no shortcuts when it comes to being relevant and authentic.

The standard package of four weeks vacation and two weeks of continuing education is never enough because other people's lives do not unfold in accord with your plans. Funerals inevitably fall during your vacation. Related to this, you have to be diligent in "taking back time" some weeks to offset the many more weeks when you will never have enough time; especially for your family.

### IV.

After a few more matters of a nuts and bolts nature, I would move on to the hard news. While parish ministry is a great delight (truly) a lot of it is about death. Certainly in proclaiming what awaits us beyond death, in understanding the value of faith in affirming one's life (and our life together) in the face of death, and making the arduous journey of grief and loss you will be required to take again and again with those in your care. There is no getting around this, and it takes a very heavy toll on one's soul. While one cannot really ever be prepared, see it coming so when it arrives (and it *will*) you are not overwhelmed.

The surprise one *never* sees coming in the parish, which you see more than one would imagine, and certainly more than one would hope, is how much people believe they can afford to lose or give up in their lives. Worse, it is usually over or about things which really do not matter much at all. The bitter irony, though, is that they, themselves, always know this to be true...at some level.

## V.

There is more hard news to share, but I will spare you the rest and move right on to the closing argument I would present before taking questions. The only way a church “works” is if the Spirit of God is moving in and around the congregation. However, the only way the Spirit moves is if the people *in* the congregation invite, welcome, and facilitate the Spirit to do it’s work. This is only ever a *mystical process*. It cannot be accomplished in any other way or through some other means. Engaging in the process requires conviction, courage, trust, steadfastness and, most importantly, the belief and expectation that God is just chomping at the bit to shake, rattle, and roll in our lives. After 32 years in the parish, I am *absolutely* certain about this. That said, it is a *very* subtle process which is easily missed and can require years, if not decades, to reveal itself. Which is why we must *continually* cultivate our faith so we might practice it.

## VI.

Of course, at the end of the presentation I fully anticipate that the first question I would be asked is the same one all of *you* are posing in your mind right now: “How do we engage in such a mystical process?” The answer I would give is to be found within today’s text from John chapter 13: “Love one another.” You will be amazed at what might happen if you will only do this *one* thing above every and all else. The trick is to not get hung up on *how* we do it, or the language we use to talk *about* doing it. Those things are secondary and superfluous to the actual doing of it; of actually *loving* one another.

Moreover, and as Jesus says, if we love one another people will know that we are Christ’s disciples such that they, too, might come to faith and love those others in *their* lives. Loving one another is the highest and most effective form of evangelism. Something to which the Church on the Park can boldly and joyfully attest.

## VII.

Before we go any further, I need to admonish us all that we need to be careful where we step. When we, in the church, talk about love we don’t mean saccharine, or mushy, or some kind of vague, hippie inspired, feeling groovy kind of vibe. The concept and expression of “love” is always more than we

imagine and greater than that for which we could ever hope. In fact, I would argue that one does not have a clue about love until one actually begins loving with consistency and intent. Given this, there are a few places where I might suggest we start.

Beginning in the late 1960's and running through the early 1980's there was a single panel comic strip produced by Kim Casali which ran every Sunday in most major newspapers titled "Love Is...". Many here, I am sure, will remember it.

## **VIII.**

Love is...accepting people for who *they* understand themselves to be, not who or what *we* think they should be or wish them to be.

Love is...having the forbearance to love a person without necessarily loving what they may believe, how they may act, or the hurt they may cause.

Love is...forgiving even though forgetting has become impossible.

Love is...taking the time and allocating the energy to speak the hard truth.

Love is...always remaining open to the future and inviting it to unfold as it must.

Love is...allowing a person to walk their own road even though it has diverged from yours.

Love is...hard to find or discover when you are angry, frightened, or ungrateful.

Love is...a process which unfolds and deepens over time both through shared experiences and by sharing the experiences you, alone, are having.

And, love is...*laughter*. While I cannot explain the causal relationship, it is nevertheless the case that wherever love is found laughter follows.

Laughter is the canary in the coal mine of love.

## **IX.**

While you may or may not agree with some of the things I just said, my guess is all of these notions are at least familiar to you because when we speak of love we typically understand it in the context of personal relationships. Love takes many forms, however.

Though I haven't quite figured out where I would fit this into my one hour crash course, I would also want to talk about institutional love. The church, as an institution, is founded on the ideal of having love for one another. That said, *all* institutions tend to want to love themselves first and foremost and the church is no exception. One of the great challenges of being a pastor is to bending the church's governance toward the church's theology. The beliefs we espouse as a church will only run as deep and true as the ways in which we act on those beliefs. Our loving actions are the means by which people will know we are Christ's disciples. It's not what we say, but what we *do* that counts.

## **X.**

As I said in last week's sermon, one of the keys to the interpretation of scripture is context. The context of today's reading from John is the Last Supper. Beginning in chapter 13 and continuing through to chapter 18 where Jesus goes to the Garden, is betrayed, and arrested, Jesus offers to the disciples (and to us as the future church) what amounts to his Famous Last Words.

If *we* knew we had only a few hours remaining with those whom we love, what would we say to them? John purports that Jesus said a great deal, as these five chapters are just chalk full of wonderful and important ideas. Jesus, though, begins first with the most important: to love one another. Not to love *others*, meaning the "them" who are beyond and outside of us, but to love *one another* meaning those who are among "us." In many ways, it is easier to offer love to the stranger, the neighbor, and for large concepts and ideals, than it is to love those closest to us.

## **XI.**

Owing to the inherent astuteness of all of you in this congregation, and all of you who have taken to reading these sermons posted to the website and emailed each week, you have no doubt guessed from today's remarks that I am considering what my own "last words" might be as I near the end of my time with you. While that day is certainly a few years off, some of these final words, and a final actions, will take awhile to formulate and express so I figure it is best to get started.

Certainly there are some structural things I would like to see us accomplish, particularly the updating of the manse (and, apparently, facilitating a million dollars in upgrades to the park) but the real “it” I hope we will “get” is understanding the fundamental importance of love as mystical process. This isn’t to say the process isn’t already at work, it most certainly is. Instead, my hope is for us to grow in our *awareness* of it and work *with* it; not just in practice, but as policy.

## **XII.**

During our time together at PK this week I told a story about a woman I had never met coming to my office out of the blue one day. This was several years ago. She was quite upset over the loss of her church home (located nearby) owing to a kerfuffle surrounding her daughter’s wedding. The family had attended the church for several generations so the daughter, now living several states away down south, sought to be married there.

As this person explained the history to me, I realized I was already aware of the story as it had told to me by a colleague seeking my counsel who was the new minister at that church, and also new to ministry. As I recall, there were clearly some issues in agreeing to perform the wedding if one was looking to find them (the exact details of which were both inessential to me then, and lost on me now). While my colleague came to a different decision, one which was in no way incorrect, I said, personally, I would agree to perform the ceremony. With my reasoning being what possible difference could it make?

## **XIII.**

This person and I chatted for quite awhile. There was heartache aplenty and no shortage of tears. I listened intently and offered solace and, I believe, was able to give some comfort. As we were winding down, I mentioned that they would be very welcome here at the Church on the Park; though I knew it would be bit of a drive. Low and behold, sometime afterward this person and her husband started attending our church and, later, became members in October of 2018. Since that time, one has served as an Elder the other as a Deacon, and each has provided a great deal of time and energy to our church’s work and mission. They attend worship nearly every Sunday, unless visiting the aforementioned daughter (still living down south) who later gave birth to their only granddaughter whom they adore.

As it is turning out, I was stunning incorrect in my original assessment. The kerfuffle over the wedding ended up making an ENORMOUS difference: to our church, to this couple and, I suspect, to the church they decided to leave.

#### **XIV.**

The other part of this story which is important to know, is that a few years later one of these folks was made to confront a *very* serious health challenge. Thankfully, all is well now such that this couple is out living their lives with great vigor and joy which is both a delight and glory to behold. If asked, I am sure they would tell you that during those dark times this congregation was there to support them and this has made an incredible difference in their own lives. All this because of two *very* different ways of loving one another in the church. While neither was necessarily “wrong” the outcomes were *vastly* different. One never knows the place to which a “yes” or a “no” might go.

As I was telling this story at PK that day, Pastor Donna added a piece I had forgotten as she ended up officiating at this wedding. She said it was the best wedding she ever did. To which I added that the day of my mother’s service I was amazed to see this couple walk in having driven four hours to support me, and to represent all of you. Jean and Pat, I cannot sufficiently tell you the difference you have made to our church and to me.

This is but one example of the mystical process that begins to work in our church, and throughout all the world, when we make famous the last words of Christ in commanding us to love one another in the same way God first loved us.

#### **XV.**

I would like to conclude today’s sermon in the same way I envision concluding my imaginary crash course in what parish ministry is *really* like. Saving the best and most important for last, I would tell them they have to stay *hopeful*. While one may not always find oneself in a position to necessarily *champion* hope, one must always at least *hold on* to hope in the face of all that appears hopeless about our world and in our lives. Not just as a pastor, but as a person.



Hope is hard earned and hard to come by, so when we see it we need to grab right on and not let go. Hope is the one thing we should never be tempted to believe we afford to lose or give up in our lives. Hope is what leads us to love and begins its mystical process.

## **XVI.**

This morning we have begun the mystical process of love through the act of Baptizing Finley Ladison. Baptism is the *ultimate* proclamation of hope. The hope of his parents, Hadie and Cole, in bringing him into this world, and the hope that we have as Christians that, now, Finley has been received into, and made a member of the body of Christ. That God has promised him life beyond death, and the joy of a life to be found within the body of Christ that is the Church universal, as well as this particular (and somewhat quirky) expression of the church here on the Park.

Who knows where the seeds we plant today might take root and, eventually, bear fruit in the lives of this child and his family? As I said earlier, and as illustrated by the story of how the McGuires came to this church, one never knows the place to which a yes, or a no, might go.

Let us allow tomorrow to worry for itself. It is enough that today we've said "YES!" to hope. Hope for Finley, hope for each of us, and hope for the world that God might yet create through Christ if we will only have love for one another. Amen.