

John 15.9-17

The Sixth Sunday of Easter May 6, 2018

final instructions

Roy W. Howard

It is not uncommon for people facing their last days to give final instructions to their loved ones, including friends and families (not to mention lawyers.) In fact for those who have such time, it is a profound blessing and a source of great comfort; for the dying as well as those preparing for the future without their loved one. Facing what is to come without denial has a way of bringing clarity to everything. Even while bearing the grievous weight of impending loss, people often describe these moments with their loved ones as holy sacred. I have been present at these holy moments when tears of sorrow are so mingled with tears of love that it is impossible to know where one ends and the other begins.

Final instructions are remembered with clarity as bright as morning light.

There I am in the hospice center standing by the bedside of the young man whose wedding was the first one I officiated. His wife, Mary, is beside me holding his hand. "When I am gone," Mike says, looking at me with focused eyes, "make sure she is okay and the baby, too. Will you?" "Yes. I will." It has been nearly thirty years since that moment. I doubt I'll ever forget that moment and Mike's final words to me.

Final instructions have clarity and purpose like no other.

Jesus knows this. It's why he spends so much time carefully and tenderly speaking with his disciples about subjects they would rather ignore, like what life will be like when he is not physically present with them. Given all that he could say but did not, it makes what he actually did say all the more important.

These are Jesus final instructions to the community of disciples – including you and me - who will carry on his ministry. Listen to them with the ears of your heart, as you might hear the words of one who loves you and is now giving you the only words that matter in this moment.

I love you.

Live in my love for you.

If you live in my love, you will do all that my Father instructs,

because you'll be living in me, in the same way I live in my Father.
We are one in this love.

Jesus gives his final instructions and the first word is love. He invites his followers into a profoundly intimate relationship with him in the oneness of divine love. The intimacy is so astonishing that you might blush in wonder. In his baptism, Jesus is called the Beloved. In our baptism we named with his name – the Beloved. The baptized become the community of the beloved. When Shan Wang is baptized this morning she will be assume the name of Jesus as her own: The Beloved, sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever.

The first word Jesus leaves with his followers is love. The second word Jesus is joy.

I have said these things to you so that my joy will be in you,
and your joy will be complete.

It's a bit startling that as Jesus is approaching his death, he speaks of joy. It's not what usually comes to mind when speaking of death. Yet, he knows what we forget: a relationship with Christ brings profound joy. This is why we can also speak of Shan's baptism as a dying and joyful rising to new life.

One of my favorite prayers is that of Teresa of Avila – "Good Lord, deliver us from silly devotions and sour-faced saints." Teresa was well known for playing practical jokes upon her sisters-in-the-convent, whom she considered far too serious. Joy, said Teresa, is freedom. Jesus doesn't mention happiness; that lovely feeling that comes and goes like the breeze. Joy is a state of wonder deeper, more lasting than fleeting moments of happiness. Someone described joy as the antidote to despair. Cynicism corrupts the heart like rust on metal. Joy protects the heart. As the poet Wendell Berry said, "be joyful even though you have considered all the facts."

The third word Jesus gives to his followers is friendship. In the book of Acts, outsiders watching the community of believers grow described the movement "the friends of Jesus." Jesus chooses his community to be his friends in the world. He gives his community everything they need – love, joy and friendship with him. Friendship is a way of living with others that is un-coerced. Friendship is mutual trust. Jesus is offering his friendship to those who love him, so that we

may be like him in the world. Wouldn't it be a beautiful thing if your co-workers and your neighbors, not to mention your family and friends who know you well, describe you as "a friend of Jesus?"

What brings more joy to the heart of God than our congregation being known as "the friends of Jesus?"

The final word that Jesus offers his disciples is, be fruitful. Live in me and you will bring forth abundance, says Jesus. You could think of this as the fruit of our baptism made visible in deeds of love.

This is the deep abiding purpose of our lives: to be the fruitful bearers of God's bright life in the broken world. It is this giving of Christ's abundant life to others for which we are chosen to be his friends. Like branches on a vine, the lives of Jesus' followers bring forth his life. The baptized community of the beloved has no other purpose than abundance.

This is our life. This is our calling. This is our joy.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.