

To Know the Love of Christ
Acts 20:17-19a; 20-28; 32-38
John 15:12-17

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

While I may, in the future, be asked to proclaim the gospel to a gathering of strangers, never again will I have the privilege of preaching in the midst of a community that I have known and that has known me for better or worse, for richer and for poorer, in sickness and in health for almost a quarter of a century! As I anticipated this day at the end of our life together, I kept returning to the scene in the Book of Acts where Paul bids a tearful farewell to the elders of the church in Ephesus. What I love about this scene is the combination of honest grief and good theology. Before they weep and embrace, the apostle proclaims the gospel one last time through the lens of his ministry with them and among them. I intend to do the same this morning.

Paul begins by acknowledging his rough start in Ephesus, marked by humility, tears and trials. God knows the trials that have humbled me and brought me to tears in this place, particularly in those first years. I learned pretty much everything the hard way. Your patience and support, your critique and wisdom bowed me down and raised me up over and over again. But here is my point and, I think, Paul’s—a point having to do with the humanity of the church and its minister. In the beginning, when I turned out not to be the minister some of you had in mind and when you turned out not to be like the congregation I had loved before you, the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Life Together* chastened me and just might chasten all of you going forward. He wrote: “[The one] who loves [her] dream of a community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though [that one’s] personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial.”

But how exactly do you love the church you have been given with all of its faults and shortcomings? When I arrived on the Hill, a former student of mine at The College of Wooster, Ellie Stratton, was your interim associate minister. Her counsel to me was to love you so that you might grow to love one another—counsel that tracked with my favorite sentence in our Book of Order: “The organization rests on fellowship and is designed not to work without trust and love.” But how? “We enter into the common life,” Bonhoeffer goes on to say, “not as demanders but as thankful recipients.” Gratitude was the first step toward loving the church God had given me. Here, then, is my first parting word: never cease to be *grateful* for the church God has given you in all of its humanity.

Next, Paul goes on to remind the Ephesians how he “did not shrink from doing anything helpful, proclaiming the message to [them] and teaching [them] publicly and from house to house....” Sometimes what a minister thinks is helpful is not so much. If you read Luke’s account of Paul’s ministry in Ephesus, you will be amused at the story of Eutychus who was sitting in an open window listening to a VERY long sermon of Paul’s when he began to sink into a deep sleep. Sad to say, Eutychus fell to his death in the middle of Paul’s sermon. Paul, being ever helpful, runs down three flights of stairs, revives him and then returns to the upper room to resume his sermon! The story is not lost on me—though it is a little late to take it to heart!

Nevertheless, like Paul, my intent was not to shrink from doing anything helpful in the pulpit and classroom, beside your hospital bed and around your kitchen table, at the font holding your children and at the edge of the graves of those you were given to love. But what sort of help,

exactly, do ministers have to give when, through preaching and teaching and pastoral care, we testify to the good news of God's grace in the midst of the congregation? This question over the years sent me to Karl Barth's answer in a lecture on "The Task of Ministry." "Why do they come to us," he asks, "when they must long since have made the discovery that they cannot expect the same service from us as they do from an attorney or a dentist, for instance..." A decade of ministry serving a small blue-collar congregation in Safenwil led this theological giant of the twentieth century to say, "It is evident that they do not need us to help them live, but seem rather to need us to help them *die*; for their whole life is lived in the shadow of death..." To paraphrase Barth, "[The] reason [you] come to us, strange as it may seem, for wisdom [for help], is because [you] know the whole network of [your] life is hung upon a thread like gossamer. [You] suddenly awake to a realization that [you] are walking upon a ridge between *time* and *eternity* that is narrower than a knife edge."

I like to imagine that helping Eutychus return to life from death changed Paul's understanding of the help his proclamation of the gospel had to give that day and every day thereafter. But I also imagine the fall of Eutychus changed the openness and vulnerability of the congregation to hearing the gospel. The only help I had to give the morning that I first preached in this pulpit was a word anchored in the refrain of "Abide with Me": *Help of the helpless, Lord abide with me*. Days before Randy Harris, a teacher of this church's youth, had fallen down a flight of stairs and had not been revived. Since that Sunday, death has stalked those we have loved close at hand, has stalked the nation as the towers fell and has stalked the city with countless lives remembered too often on our front lawn. But more than death itself, death-dealers have caused us to order our lives by fear more than hope. To live in fear is to live in the shadow of death.

The help I had for you on the first day is the help I still have for you on the last. It is simply the assurance, all evidence to the contrary, that love has triumphed over death. Put another way, love and not the grave is the destination of every child of God ever born. Put another way, love is stronger than death. They say a minister has one sermon in her. I guess that is mine and the "therefore" is this: because love is stronger than death, you may dare to fight the dragons of darkness with the confidence of those who belong, in life and in death, to the almighty, powerless love revealed in a manger and on a cross. My second parting word: *Be of good courage!*

Then Paul instructs the elders to "keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God..." Why keep watch? Paul is concerned about voices that will try to lure the Ephesians away from the gospel, apparently the same voices that tried to have at them while Paul was with them. What voices would I warn you about going forward, voices that have nipped at the church's heels ever since we met? Maybe it would be the voices so concerned over the church's survival that they urge you to go shallow—shallow in the church's witness so as not to be prophetic, shallow in the church's music and worship so as merely to be entertaining, shallow in the church's preaching and teaching so as not to be substantive. "Put out in the deep and let down your nets for a catch," Jesus once said to Simon. I take that to mean disciples are made when the church plumbs the depths of its theological and biblical tradition in the service of its witness to God's reign breaking in.

I also take that to mean "keeping watch" over the flock does not mean keeping the church safe but keeping the church faithful. "If we lose a generation of young people in the church, it won't be because we didn't entertain them," Shane Claiborne writes. "It will be because we didn't dare them to do something meaningful with the gospel in light of the world we live in." To wit, the Franciscans pray, "May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships/So that you may live deep within your heart./May God bless you with

anger/At injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people/So that you may work for justice, freedom and peace./May God bless you with tears/To shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger and war/So that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and/To turn their pain into joy./And may God bless you with enough foolishness/To believe that you can make a difference in the world,/So that you can do what others claim cannot be done,/To bring justice and kindness to all [God's] children and the poor." "The Church is called to undertake this mission," says our Book of Order, "even at the risk of losing its life." My third parting word: continue to dare the depths, for Christ's sake and for the sake of the world God so loved.

Finally Paul does the only thing any of us can do in the face of endings and partings: he commends the church in Ephesus to God and to the message of God's grace, a message that is able to build them up and to give them the inheritance among all who are sanctified. Font, table, word, prayer are traditionally what Presbyterians call the ordinary means of God's grace, the tangible ways God's grace is known in our life together. But I would add showing up for Christ's sake. Frederick Buechner, a preacher I used to quote ad nauseam in my first years of ministry, tells of a particularly dark time in his life. His child was sick and that made him sick too. One day the phone rang at his home in Vermont. The caller was an acquaintance, a minister, who lived in Charlotte asking about how he was. "I assumed," Buechner wrote, "he was calling from home." But no, he was twenty minutes away. He thought, maybe, it might be of some help to have an extra friend around for a day or two and had not called in advance lest he be told he was crazy to go to the trouble. So he just showed up. "I don't think anything we found to say to each other amounted to very much," Buechner writes "There was nothing particularly religious about it....We just took a couple of walks, had a meal or two together, and smoked our pipes....That was about it."

To commend you to God and to the message of God's grace now, at the end, as we part, means simply to give you into each other's care; it means giving you to be God's near embrace to every vulnerable other—unexpected, uninvited, un-asked-for, freely given. My last word: love one another as you have loved me, and I you, because we were first loved by God in Christ.

When he had finished speaking, he knelt down with them all and prayed, There was much weeping among them all; they embraced and kissed and grieved. Then they brought him to the ship. Time to take me to the ship, I guess. (Drop mike!) Thanks be to God for the incomparable gift of each of you and the gift of this beloved church that is my heart.