

“What Will You Do About It?”

I.

It's Baccalaureate Sunday here at Plymouth Church –the day we set aside to honor the graduating seniors in our midst. And how, exactly, do we honor our seniors? By saving them a seat, at the early Sunday service, right down at the very front of the sanctuary, so someone can stand up here and preach at them for awhile.

There is your first life lesson, class of 2009: Whenever someone says they want to honor you, be very suspicious. Make sure you know where all the exits are.

I'm not really sure what I am doing up here. When I last preached on Baccalaureate Sunday, some three years ago, I thought I preached that sermon in such a way so as to make certain I would never be asked to do it again. I guess I did not try hard enough. But what I said back then still seems true today: When it comes to advice...I've got nothing. I have not lived much longer than you have; I can not claim the kind of insight that accompanies bad knees and bifocals. If you want the wisdom that comes with maturity, go talk to Angie Witmer. I'm much too young.

But maybe that is the second life lesson this morning: Youth is a wonderful season of life, because you are free to own up to your ignorance. You do not have to be ashamed of all the things you do not know. And believe me when I tell you: this is a gift. It can make you humble, open, receptive to what the world wants to teach you.

At least, that is they way it went for me. I started out in pastoral ministry the summer before most of you started the sixth grade –August, 2002. As a 25-year-old minister who was routinely mistaken for a 16-year-old paperboy, I was quickly forced to face up to the staggering depths of my own ignorance. I did not have any wisdom or insight of my own to offer my congregation; I had to look outside of myself. I had to fall back on the strange wisdom of the Bible; try to convey its message instead of my own. That habit has served me well.

So the third life lesson this morning will not come from me; it comes from the 15th chapter of the Gospel of John. In these words of Jesus, we learn that the only life worth living is one that can risk everything on the love of God. On the eve of your graduation, I pray that you will learn to live that kind of life.

II.

This is a pretty appropriate passage for our purpose this morning -perhaps the closest thing we have to a Baccalaureate sermon from the lips of Jesus. By the time we come to this point in the Gospel of John, it is almost graduation day. These words come from the Last Supper, the last night that Jesus will spend with his closest friends. Tomorrow he will be betrayed, arrested, denied and crucified. For the first followers of Jesus, there will be some difficult days ahead. Soon they will have to stand on their own two feet; have to find a way to carry on without the one who brought them this far.

Class of 2009, does any of that sound familiar? Do you think you can relate? This is a kind of graduation scene, and so Jesus is doing what we so often do at these times of transition: trying to impart some wisdom, trying to tell them some things that may prove

helpful for the journey ahead. And John clearly intends this message for *all* the followers of Jesus, not only those who happened to be there that night. These words are for all of us. These words are for you

Now, I admit that, as Baccalaureate sermons go, this one sounds strange. Jesus does not congratulate anyone for all their hard work; he does not tell anyone to dream big dreams and reach for the sky and shoot for the stars and all of that stuff; he just talks a lot about love: *As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you... This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ...I am giving you these commands so that you may love each other.*

On the eve of your graduation, what is the one thing you need to know? *You are loved.* More than you can possibly fathom. More than I could ever explain. You are loved. You are, in fact, the *friends* of Jesus.

But be careful here. “Friend” is a tricky word. Last time I checked, I had 433 “friends” on Facebook. Are all of those people actually my friends? Could I call them up at three in the morning? Probably not. Most of them are more like acquaintances – people I kind of, sort of know; people I would talk to if I saw them on the street.

But that is not what we are talking about here. When Jesus says *I have called you my friends*, he does not mean he wants to maybe have coffee some time. In Greek, the word “friend” comes from one of the words for “love.” *I have called you my beloved.* That is what Jesus is saying. You are the beloved of God.¹

And what does that love look like? Jesus gets pretty specific in verse 13, one of the better known verses in the Bible: *No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.* So love has something to do with laying down your life –but not in some final or fatal sense. This is categorically *not* an invitation to some sort of dramatic or heroic self-sacrifice. Life rarely offers us such opportunities. The Greek phrase translated “lay down your life” really suggests something like “risk your life.”² It means taking a chance on something –which, of course, is what real love is all about.

To get married, or to have a child, to find your life’s work or even to befriend another human being is to take a tremendous risk, to open yourself up both to incredible joy and unspeakable pain. You can not have the one without the possibility of the other. Love makes us vulnerable. Love requires risk.

Now, this much we know: Jesus loves us. And that means Jesus takes a risk on us –a big one. He risks his good name by associating with his less-than-perfect followers. He risks his life’s work by passing the torch to us. He risks the proclamation of the promised reign of God by staking it on our meager ability to live like it is true, to live out the love of God.

Jesus loves us. So Jesus takes an enormous risk on us. And Jesus wants nothing more than for us to love in return, to try taking some risks of our own. Verse 16: *You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit...*” The love of God has set your life apart for something extraordinary: to bear witness to the love of God, to bring forth beautiful things. But that will require some risk.³

It is a pretty simple message, really: God loves you, so love other people. God is willing to take a risk on you. What are you willing to risk for God?

III.

But look what I did: I started preaching when I'm supposed to be giving a baccalaureate address. So let us come back to the matter at hand: what does any of this have to do with graduation?

Class of 2009, if you have spent any time around this church, you have heard this message many many times: Love God, love other people. Love God, love other people. Maybe you have grown sick of hearing it. But if you have spent any time outside of this church, you know that there are a lot of other messages out there. And those other messages often make their way into graduation speeches.

They tend to go something like this: Class of 2009, we celebrate your accomplishments. Now go out there and make us proud. Get in to the right school. Find the right internship. Polish up your resume. Work on those interview skills. Be sure to land the right job and then climb that ladder as high as it will go. Try to obtain a suitable romantic partner, someone good looking and charming but...not too good looking or too charming. Buy the right house in the right neighborhood and start saving some money so that someday your kids will be able to do all of this again. You're graduating! Good for you. Now get out there and make something of yourself. *Be successful*. That is what you have done so far, and that is what we expect you to keep on doing...no matter the cost...for the rest of your natural life.

You will hear that message many times in this graduation season. But let me suggest a different approach: Don't do that. Don't go out and squander the next several decades doing all the things someone says you are supposed to do, jumping through all of their hoops. Don't settle for something so sad and petty and small as success. Don't sell yourself short.

You were meant for so much more. You are loved by God. You are chosen by God. God has taken a chance on you. And if God's gamble will ever pay off, you will have to ignore all the people who think they know what you should do with your life. You will have to shut out all of those other voices and get in touch with your own deepest longings. What is it inside of you that yearns to be free? What beautiful thing will you bring forth to enrich the world? What risks do you need to take?⁴

In theology, the word for these kinds of questions is *vocation*. Fredrick Buechner defines vocation as "that place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."⁵ In other words: what do you long to do? And what does the world need you to do? Find that, and you find everything. God's gamble will pay off in a great big way.

Class of 2009: The God of all the universe is betting the house -on you. So what will you do about it? What will you do with your life?

That is the question. And we can not wait to see your answer.

Amen.

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Notes

¹ See Gail R. O'Day's comments in the *New Interpreter's Bible: John*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), p758.

² For me, this is the key to this passage. The verb *titheimi*, translated "lay down" in verse 13, occurs again in verse 16, where the NRSV translates it as "appointed." Given the connotation of risk, the passage seems to depict God's love as an unending circle of divine and human reciprocal risk taking –an idea I find very attractive. See the entry on *titheimi* in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Volume VIII. Edited by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Fredrich. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), pp.152-157. Raymond Brown thinks along similar lines with his translation of verse 13 as "hand over one's life," comparing to a similar phrase in John 10.11. *The Gospel According to John (xiii-xxi)*. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966).

³ John's use of the language of election in this passage could easily form the basis for a whole other sermon. For now, some lines from Karl Barth will have to do: "We choose the only possibility which is given to us...Those who choose the name of Jesus Christ choose the only possibility which is given to them...they elect their own election." *Church Dogmatics*. Translated by G.W. Bromiley, G.T. Thompson, Harold Knight. I. 2, pp.350-352. (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2009). (Note: pagination refers to the original English edition of the *Dogmatics*).

⁴ I know of no better treatment of these issues than Brian Mahan's *Forgetting Ourselves on Purpose: Vocation and the Ethics of Ambition*. (Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 2002). Everyone should read this book!

⁵ Buechner, Frederick. "Wishful Thinking," *A Theological ABC*. (Harper & Row, NY. 1973).