

Bryan Appleby-Wineberg sermon 5/19/19 Baccalaureate Service

In the name of The Father, The Son, and The Holy Spirit, Amen.

Good morning dear friends, almost graduates, parents and church family. I was somehow voluntold to preach today, and am extremely nervous to be up here. In addition I have this embarrassing habit of crying whenever I am speaking in front of people. So apologies even before I start. My hope is that you can get past the presentation and get some actual content from these few minutes we have together.

I teach for a living and so I like to frame things for people to help them more easily follow my ranting.....

To that end, I am going to move through this little presentation in 3 parts: First I will talk about our Gospel reading for today. Then in two parts, I am going to honor Kate's suggestion to "tell us something you wish you had known when you were graduating from high school." There are two major things I wish I had known when I was graduating high school. To explain them and make them relevant to the five of you, I am going to tell a few stories, make a few observations, and by the time I get done with all three parts, with any luck, I will have looped back around to the Gospel reading and maybe just maybe, something will stick.

In preparation for this little sermon on John 13 verses 31-35, I first went to Father Todd to ask for some help and clarity. He offered guidance but was so careful not to specifically tell me what to do....thankfully he realized my severe need for focus and suggested I might want to concentrate my efforts on just the Gospel...so that is what I have done. During our meeting, I realized I don't actually have any skills related to analyzing bible passages and have even less biblical knowledge. He had suggested maybe I could do some reading about what other people think of this passage.....so.... I have drawn on 3 sources:

Dr. Karyn L. Wiseman is the Associate Professor of Homiletics and Associate Dean for First Theological Degrees at United Lutheran Seminary, Gettysburg + Philadelphia.

She wrote: *I Refuse to Preach a Boring Sermon: Engaging 21<sup>st</sup> Century Listeners* (Pilgrim Press, 2013).

Frank L. Crouch, Vice-President and Dean at Moravian Theological Seminary

and finally

Elisabeth Johnson, is an ELCA pastor and missionary serving in Cameroon as a professor at the Lutheran Institute of Theology in Meiganga

So away we go, and remember as I go through this, these ideas are not really my own....

For the Gospel, Dr. Wiseman asks us to first set the scene: It is the last supper, Jesus knows what is going to happen, he knows Judas is going to betray him, he knows Peter will deny him, AND he knows he is going to die by crucifixion. And what does he do in this situation with this knowledge? He washes the feet of both Judas and Peter, he feeds them, he loves them....actively.

so Judas leaves....”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.” .....**PAUSE!!!**..... I do realize some of you do not find this passage difficult at all, but I also hope I am not the only person who does find it to be totally confusing. If I am the only one, that is fine, I do have a trumpet brain after all...however, on the off chance I am not the only one here who didn't understand that, here is a simple way to think of it..... all three articles I read basically say it all comes down to the understanding that through the crucifixion and resurrection God and Jesus are glorified. Dean Crouch says "in a real sense, only with the arrest, crucifixion, and death does the hour finally come for him to be glorified". For me this was enough to satisfy my "what one earth does this mean?" question. I hope it does for you as well.

Next we get to the section where he says you can't follow. I get this, in the context of going to heaven and the resurrection and if I stretch the connection to the point of breaking maybe you can see that where our 5 young people are going, this is also true of us parents.....we can't go and look after them the whole time. Yes it is a stretch.

Finally we get to this stunning new commandment.

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

I think this is where all the important stuff really is....and the readings agree with me. They point out that it is not a sentimental love, it is an active love. A difficult love. A representative and public love. It requires that you do things, behave in a certain way, React to situations in life a certain way. It requires that we actually and actively love our neighbors.....

Now all three authors I read point out that most people interpret this passage as meaning you only have to love those in this room (that is hard enough I suppose), but they also agree that this isn't just about us.....that to spread the word, and to be disciples, and for the world to know we are disciples we must indeed actively love everyone.

Dr. Wiseman in her article quotes Dr. King to make her point. King said "Peace is not the absence of war, but the presence of justice." For her, Justice doesn't mean retribution or the bad guy getting it in the end, it means equality, and when we live in a world of equality we are indeed living and acting on that commandment to love one another.

Now, I think I can go to the other two parts but I will be referring back to this most protein filled section of the lesson, "Love one another".

So here are the two huge things I wish I had known when I graduated high school and left home. 1) I wish I had known just how naive I was (and am), and 2) I wish I had known Jesus.

On point #1.....I was and to large extent still am very naive. I grew up an only child in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The town was 100K people and was home to a university student population of 35,000. As a world leader in education and research there were people from all over the planet who lived there. My life was filled with people from African-American factory workers to actual African UN administrators, to Vietnam refugees, to Turkish professors to blue collar grocery store clerks. Literally everyone I knew had a different story, complexion, financial situation, and background. It was quite a liberal and accepting place.

In addition, my own life was charmed. I was quarterback of the football team, first trumpet of the top band, and co-captain of the baseball team. I once said to Sarah "I don't know what all the angst about high school is or was, I loved high school." She stopped me short and said "I am not sure that as Mr. Popular and the quarterback of the football team you have any perspective on high school life that qualifies you to make any assertions about other people's experience". I even married way up.

But I wish I had known that the rest of the world wasn't like that.....when I went out into the world I had no idea that there would be people who could and would ignore the plight of their neighbors and countrymen just so they could make more money. That there would be white men who honestly believe it was their place to tell women of color what to do with their bodies.

That there would be people who I would need to love and work with and break bread with who when faced with facts about global climate change would call it a hoax to my face. That the people they listened to on the subject were paid by Exxon to support fossil fuel development. That my friends and colleagues would still place more of their trust in an Exxon paid speaker than a NASA scientist. That there would be a whole industry of people dedicated to making money off of fear and distrust and hate of "the other". I had no idea. I was naive. And what does Jesus command? We are to actively love these sisters and brothers.

I was naive to the plight of people of color, and women, and issues of sexual orientation. In my world, people of color were at every level of society, for most of my life my mother was a lawyer and made way more money than my father. The idea that people of color were less than, or could be looked down upon, or that women weren't equal simply never entered my worldview. And look at American now.....

Since we have quite a diverse congregation, I actually have a somewhat diverse family, Kate attends a diverse school, and I have several close colleagues who are people of color, recently took a scientifically constructed racial bias test at school. I can tell you all about the test and how it was constructed, but suffice it to say the 20-30 min test was about forcing you to get past rational thought and down to what you actually feel at your core. ....at the end it said "Click here to see your results." I was nervous.....what would it show? I hit the button and it said "You strongly FAVOR black faces and are somewhat biased against white faces." Now admittedly all the white faces looked like frat boys to me, but the reality I want you to understand is that NOT ALL PEOPLE think this way....I didn't know I was biased against white faces... I was naïve.

I was also naive to how people feel about illness, and death....and healthcare.

Recently a very close friend of mine (who I know to be quite conservative) was upset about Obamacare. I asked them, "so.....if someone who is working full-time and doesn't have health insurance and gets sick with something easily deadly but also easily curable.....and they can't afford the treatment and they die....is that OK?"

An my close friend's response was "Well life is hard."

But what is the commandment? Love one another. We are called, indeed required to love one another.....and it isn't just love for the people it is easy to love....the commandment was to the disciples BUT it was wider. We are called to ACTIVELY love....we have to help them, care for them, encourage them, hold them up, make their lives better. This is what Jesus requires of us even if they don't require it of themselves.

For you going out into this world this is a HUGE deal, you will have roommates, and classmates, and professors, and colleagues, and staff members who will make your life miserable, and I want you to remember what Jesus commands of your encounters with those people. It is not supposed to be easy. It won't be easy. But it is required. I wish I had been prepared for that reality.....maybe I wouldn't still be struggling with that commandment today.

The second thing I wish I had known.....wasn't a thing.....it was Jesus. In this way I am incredibly envious of you 5 and impressed by your parents.

Jesus wasn't really a thing in my house growing up. We did go to church (well my mom did) and all three of us would go at Christmas and Easter.....at Christmas we would actually go to 2 services..... first we would hit the church in town that had the best brass group playing....and second we would head to the church that had the best candle ceremony (all the lights out at the end, and process out in silence just holding your lit candle).

You may or may not know, I wasn't baptized until 23 years ago when we baptized Hannah. In the past few years I have come to understand how difficult it must have been for Christians who knew me... .. the people in my life walked the path with me every day. Three of my closest high school friends are now ministers. I am sure they found my opinions and actions and statements incredibly abrasive and difficult, and yet they helped me, lifted me up, supported me, comforted me, loved me. They practiced, even then, an ACTIVE Christian love. You will have to do this with people you know too.

In fact for me it is even a bit worse, as it was a problem in my marriage. Well that is the point, it wasn't a problem in my marriage. Sarah put up with it, never mentioned it, never forced it, always supported me, lifted me up, loved me, and when we realized there could be no communion at our wedding she did not insist on my baptism.....nor did her parents.....who also practiced an incredibly active and supportive love. I now know how hard that must have been for them. And I am now even more impressed by their grace and support of my own faith journey. All of them, by their actions, not just their hearts and emotions showed what it means to be Christian and to actually live this commandment.

In your lives you will be faced with many many many difficult situations. In the coming years you will be asked to stand up for principals your church family, and your own family, and Jesus have helped you learn and understand. You must stand

and be counted, you must find the strength to do what is right, you must show the world, your world, what it means to Love in a very active way. This might mean standing up for yourself, it might mean standing up and supporting a classmate in a difficult verbal debate, this might mean standing up against unjust rules and expectations on your job, but make no mistake....you are called to stand up and show your love for both parties.....help them understand, help them see the situation differently, actively work to change the culture. My mother had a great saying (it might not have been hers but she was the one who told it to me all the time), "You don't have to change the world, but you do have a moral obligation to change your corner of it." And I think that with Jesus as your guide you will find the strength to make your part of the world more just, more equitable, more reasonable, with more understanding. You will indeed be faced with many people who disagree with you and with what you are trying to accomplish, but remember, Jesus has your back and commands you to help those people and support them and encourage and lift them up. Jesus said "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Amen