

A CORONAVIRUS COMMENCEMENT

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"I wish the Ring had never come to me" says Frodo, in the first book of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy by J.R.R. Tolkien. "I wish none of this had happened," he laments, in a tone with which all of us could empathize.

"So do I," the wizard Gandalf replies, "and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."

What to do with the time that has been given us? That is the question for this Coronavirus Commencement. For our graduates from high school and college, yes. But honestly for all of us, who are graduating from life as we once knew it to life as it has come to be. And, may I suggest, the life that will continue to become, even though we wish it were not so.

The truth is that *this* time – the time of the coronavirus – is perhaps more honest with you who are graduating about the world you will encounter in the next stage of your journey than any other time could ever have been.

The truth is, we are dying: 90,000 of us in the United States as of this morning. For context, imagine the entire population of my own Berkeley County, West Virginia, gone by the end of the summer.

The truth is the coronavirus has lifted a veil on the-world-at-the-so-called-margins that has existed right here all along: the deadliness of inequality, the violence of racism, the painfulness of betrayal and denial and abandonment.

And we *all* have to decide what to do about it.

Not unlike the disciples in the lesson from the Gospel of John this morning, I must say. And Jesus, facing his own death and the all-too-human failure that will accompany it.

As things are about to go from bad to worse, in our gospel lesson for today, Jesus The Rabbi-Teacher gathers his disciple-students for one final lesson. A capstone experience, if you will.

To sum it all up, Jesus tells them, as I am about to leave and life is about to get very difficult, I just need you to love one another.

Not in the sappy greeting card fleeting emotionality of love. But in the never-quitting, never-failing, always faithful through thick and thin, in good times and bad active choice of fidelity. To your God. And to your neighbor. And to your self.

I need you to do this, the Rabbi-Teacher tells his students, I need you to love one another as I have loved you, Jesus says, because this is the only way to sustain Life (with a capital L) in all of its fullness, even in the face of death.

The only way to sustain Life (with a capital L) in all of its fullness, Jesus says, even in the face of death, is to figure out, as I have taught you, how to make sure all are fed. Even if you think you only have five loaves and two fish. And not ever to quit until you do.

The only way to sustain Life (with a capital L) in all its fullness, Jesus says, even in the face of death, is to heal, as I have taught you, as many of the sick as you can. On the Sabbath, if you must. And to defend the outcast,

as I have taught you, even if they are caught red-handed in what you call “Sin.” (As what happened with the so-called “Woman Caught in Adultery.”)

The only way to sustain Life (with a capital L) in all its fullness, Jesus says, even in the face of death, is to look the world’s hatred straight in the eye, as I have taught you, and steadfastly refuse to return evil for evil. And not ever to quit until you do.

The only way to sustain Life (with a capital L), in all its fullness, Jesus says, even in the face of death, even in the face of the worst that is in us, is to love one another: in a never-quitting, never-failing, always faithful through thick and thin, in good times and bad active choice of fidelity. To your God. And to your neighbor. And to your self. Even when everyone – and everything – around you is teaching you otherwise.

You can do this! Jesus encourages his student/ disciples, what I have decided to call his Going-to-the-Cross Commencement Address.

You *can* do this.

Not because you are such good students, Jesus says, or even because I am such a good teacher. You can do this because God will help you when it is really, really hard.

And so will I.

So as I, Pastor Gusti, stand before you today, in the light of the Gospel that is before us, and the Going-to-the-Cross Commencement Address that Rabbi Jesus offers his student-disciples, I have to confess I am almost giddy!

It almost seems as if we who are graduating from high school and college – and the school of life as we once knew it – into the school of life as it has come to be (and will continue to become) in the age of the coronavirus ... it almost seems as if we might be graduating into the most *hopeful* of times, even if everything around us feels utterly otherwise.

Yes, the truth of the worst that is in us as *homo sapiens* is emphatically before us. But in that worst, I believe God is still calling us to the *best* of who we can be, when we trust the teaching of love made clear in the ministry of Jesus, and guard it with our lives.

I say “Alleluia!” for the Coronavirus Commencement and all it is teaching us today. “Just keep playing,” as the poet says, in our bulletin cover reading this morning. “Mastering as you do the step/Into disorder this [truth revealed by the coronavirus has] meant.”

God is giving us one more chance to live faithfully into the resurrection promise, I believe. Just as the disciples of Jesus do once they finally wrap their heads around the truth that life as they knew it has ended and Life (with a capital L) in all its fullness depends on their willingness to practice all they have been taught.

I say conspire *with* the coronavirus as a chance to learn all over again how to be gracious in our living, entrusted with the teaching of Jesus: to love one another in the never-quitting, never-failing, always faithful through thick and thin, in good times and bad active choice of fidelity that Christ has loved us.

And not ever to quit until we do.

Amen.