**If You Love Me**

**Cooke’s-Portsmouth**

**John 14:15-21**

**May 17, 2020**

# On a recent morning I heard Thomas Lynch, an American undertaker, poet and author interviewed on the CBC. I did not hear the entire interview but one thing that he said captured my attention. The interviewer asked him to explain the line attributed to him that “mourning is romance in reverse.” He contrasted a new romance as coming together and wanting to stay together and death as a letting go and a moving away from. The quote is from his book, *The Undertaking: Life Studies from the Dismal Trade* and includes the following: the meaning of life is connected, inextricably, to the meaning of death; that mourning is a romance in reverse, and if you love, you grieve and there are no exceptions-- only those who do it well and those who don't.

I don’t know what sets apart those who grieve well from those who don’t. Does it mean keeping a memory alive by being mindfully and painfully aware of the anniversary of a loved one’s birth and death? I speak from experience that the latter is much easier to mark than the former. We can recall the anniversary of the loss of a loved one by putting a memorial notice in the newspaper or visiting the cemetery to lay flowers. It is harder to mark the anniversary of the birth when death has claimed them. What does a parent do when the birthday of a deceased child makes its annual appearance? Do we mark the day with some kind of ritual or simply let the day pass without acknowledgment? To mark it seems as strangely wrong as not marking it all.

We live in a death denying society. In the wake of loss we come together and offer condolences and casseroles; we listen to eulogies and celebrate the resurrection. They are gone, but not forgotten; deceased but somehow alive in another place as well as in our hearts and minds. Thank you cards are written, closets purged and life returns to normal for everyone except the grieving. The challenges of navigating a new normal begin and life will never be the same again. Jesus seemed to understand this most keenly.

As he is preparing his disciples to withstand his rejection, betrayal, death and resurrection he is giving them the permission to remember him: to remember his teachings is their legacy for all time. In fact, he makes remembering the earmark of their love for him. If you love me you will remember my commandments and keep them.

If you love me my words will not die with me but will live on in you. We have been given the permission and the responsibility to remember his life. Nowhere is it suggested that disciples remember only for an acceptable time. His life and legacy live on through us as disciples. There is no statute of limitation on his life post resurrection.

The world will not see me but you will see me. Because I live you will also live. If you love me your will remember and keep my commandments. If you love me you will see me- not as the world has come to understand seeing with the eyes of the body but you will see with the keen and more discerning eyes of faith .I will not leave you. I am with you. These are empowering words of affirmation and hope.

This passage from John’s gospel is read at many funerals, but like the Shepherd’s Psalm it is so much more than a funeral text. It is instructive; reminding us how to live as servants and agents of the gospel. And it is grounding; reminding that we see not as the world sees. When the world sees the absence of God in the wake of a tragedy, we seek the presence of Grace. When others are feeling beleaguered and neglected because of circumstance, we hold to the truth that we have not been abandoned and that we are not alone. Which does not mean that we will be exempt from tragedy, diagnosis, calamity or disappointment. It means that regardless of what befalls we have not been abandoned or left to our own devices. If we love Christ we will remember his words and find strength, compassion and encouragement within them.

This is an empowering text that has deep significance for me because it was one of the texts used in the sermon preached at the funeral of our daughter, who passed away on this date in 1997. It was used in tandem with other literature including the much loved children’s Story The Velveteen Rabbit and the rhetorical question posed by a toy bunny to a sagely horse about what is real. From that funeral sermon given, by the Rev. Mary Beer, is the following that never ceases to move me and ground me

What is real is that God has not abandoned us. To be sure, we may feel that way right now, and this is ok. But if God had abandoned us, there would be no doctors coming in the middle of the night to ease the pain, no nurses checking on us by day, no medicine, no research. If God had abandoned us there would be no broken hearted community gathered today, to sing through tears because we know that there is more to what is real than what we see today. If God had abandoned us there would be no angels to come at 3:00 a.m. and carry a suffering child to her new home in what we call heaven.

I watched God’s love come to us in the form of doctor’s nurses, and friends coming to the door with cards, a rose and a ring symbolizing peace. I saw the God who cannot forget us any more than a mother can forget her child for she died listening to her mother’s voice telling her over and over that she would always be remembered. I saw what God’s love must be like as I witnessed her father hold her close, suffering with her and reassuring her of eternal love. And we saw together the beginning of new life; the resurrection promised through Jesus. Because some power beyond our understanding gave her strength after all she had endured to come back for one brief moment; to show us that she saw something we could not as her eyes focussed for the first time in 24 hours on the ceiling. And she acknowledged that she knew how much she was loved before the angels carried her safely home. It was as if we caught a glimpse, all that we are ever allowed in this life, just a glimpse of that eternity.

I read the words of my colleague preached twenty-three years ago and the passage of time is like an instant. I am comforted and reassured of the power and presence of God in no less a way today than I was when I first heard these words. Death is real but it does not usurp life. Grief is real but it need not have the final say. Life and love are eternal even if we do not see as the world sees. Her words remind me that if we love someone then we are to remember. In fact it is remembering that is the earmark of love. If you love me you will remember me and the message that I imparted. My life carries on in you.

If you love me. The love that Jesus wants his followers to embrace is not an abstract, philosophical concept but that modeled by a Nazarene who looks and talks like them. But with one exception; he was not held captive to social convention or mores. His love was not sentimental but empowering. His love was not subject to condition but was unconditional. His love was inclusive and not exclusive.

He held women in high regard and treated them like equals. He had a respect for children and regarded them as no less deserving of being taken seriously than an adult. He supped with the high born and turned loaves and fishes into a banquet for the poor and marginalized. He offered help to those outside of his social and ethnic group. He recognized the potential in fishermen to become disciples and tax collectors to make an honest living. He attended services of worship and celebrated the rituals and festivals that cemented his faith and were the very foundation upon which he stood.

If you love me you will keep my commandments. The world will not see me but you will see me. Because I live you also will live.

These are very real times in which we are living. I know that no one needs reminding of the restrictions on freedom that we are living. And every day there are new reports on how there will be ongoing restrictions on our freedom even after some of the restrictions in place currently are eased. How long will it be before we can actually go out to lunch with someone and not need to be six feet apart? Will we distance ourselves from one another when we can worship together again? Will we greet one another with a hug or will we be properly refined and keep our hands at our sides and exchange meaningful glances and nods of the head? Will we walk first to the hand sanitizing station before we enter the sanctuary for worship?

Will our children and grandchildren experience going to a ball park and being a part of a capacity crowd cheering on the team?

Will baseball players share the same dugout and locker room or will athletes need to dress and warm up in intervals?

Will we buy concert tickets and need to leave two seats between us so that we cannot even share our responses to a song with the person that we have attended with?

Will we realize that perhaps we can work from home? That online learning is a very real alternative to the classroom? Will our relationships with one another become increasingly stoic such that we conduct ourselves more like automatons than human beings? Or will we respect restriction and proffer handshakes and hugs? Covide19 has been a formidable opponent; the lingering effects will continue long after the pandemic ends. Surviving this pandemic will be etched into our memories forever. And in remembering the restrictions placed upon us, the fear of contracting and spreading the disease and the new normal that will become our new way of being even something as frightening and sinister as a worldwide pandemic will have a life in its wake. So how will we remember Jesus?

Will our love be constrained or will it be lavished in his name and in accordance with his dying wish: If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

Mourning may very well be romance in reverse: a letting go and retreating from but it does need not to be the complete denial of one’s existence. If we love, we remember. And if we love we keep the person alive by integrating their teachings and modeling their actions. We may let go of the body but not the life. We may not see them but that does not mean that they cease to exist. Love, like life is eternal.

As we slowly emerge from the cocoons within which we have been living I hope that a similar metamorphosis will have taken place that has changed us from caterpillars into butterflies. Life as we knew it may be inextricably changed and we may need to navigate a new normal for a time and perhaps forever. But as we navigate the new normal and learn to live with restrictions on our freedoms I hope that we will not forget the lessons learned or the faith that we share. If we love Jesus as Christ then we will keep his memory alive by living as he lived.

We may need to temper our expressions of affection and respect boundaries again in a way that we have moved away from in recent years; but we must find the way to love as Jesus loves. With respect. With inclusivity. With integrity, compassion and empathy. May it be so for us now and always. Amen.