

Some time ago, I sat with a man resting on the edge of death, me in a vinyl-upholstered, easy-to-clean chair, him in a posture-adjusted hospital bed. Ya know, in those situations, just about everybody responds differently. Some are angry, some relieved, some even giddy. But with this fella, it was just the most natural, easy thing. He was so at ease, we might as well've been perched on the edge of the squared hole of his grave, legs swinging above the dirt like toddlers on too-tall seats. We sat there talking about all sorts of things, from war to grandchildren to the weather. For much of the time, Death's patient presence wasn't a bother. It was just another normal part of the scene, as normal as easy-to-clean tiles and the aesthetically empty drop ceiling. Death was normal there, but not irrelevant because each topic began and ended as though the man in the bed needed to have his final say on every aspect of the world. Now, I don't want to give the impression that this was some great Last Will and Testament. There were no earth-shattering proclamations, no pithy last words. It was more like he needed to note something about everything he'd experienced, speaking his gratitude, his worry, his hope one final time. "It's lovely that forsythia bushes bloom so freely now, but they really shouldn't thrive this far north." "War is an atrocity in and of itself." "Ticks sure are getting worse." Amen, brother.

In that survey of life, we covered a lot of ground with legs swinging above his final resting place. He had so much to say about so many things that I figured he must have some deep wisdom to pass on. So, I asked, "Is there anything you want me to tell folks? Anything you want me to tell the church?" He nodded, not so much in agreement as in recognizing some gift in the question itself and then turned his head away looking to the far corner of the room where the ceiling meets the wall as though that's where the deep truths of the universe reside. Maybe that's where Death waited quiet and patient, nodding assent, giving permission to say one last true thing. "Go ahead, old friend, one more." Those tired, sick, ancient eyes turned back and locked to mine with an intensity reserved for battlefields or wedding days. One last bit of advice for the people of St. Thomas' from a man waiting for death. All he said was, "Love."

Given how often I sit in that same place with folks, I've become a kind of keeper of last words. I suppose most priests are, nurses too, certainly hospice caregivers. Some of y'all've had the privilege of hearing 'em, and you who have know the beautiful weight that comes with receiving that gift. So, when that man turned his head and locked eyes and gave me his last treasure, I felt like an ancient messenger tasked with delivering urgent and vital instruction. Of all the vital instruction, though, that was the last I expected. I don't know, maybe I thought he'd say something about upping pledges or spill where the secret files are hidden. I expected something more exciting, more vital, more, I don't know, uncommon? I expected earth-shattering wisdom, but instead I got a Beatles' lyric. But at the same time that my brain wanted to dismiss that overly simplistic final instruction, my eyes watered, and my heart - as John Wesley says - my heart was strangely warmed.

God is Love. That second scripture reading says so, of course, but we know it to be true regardless. We've felt it, and at our best, we've lived it. Love. The word shows up in the Bible no fewer than 500 times, 29 times just in that one passage from John's letter. This should be no surprise. We know love is at our core. It's no wonder my heart warmed. So, I've been thinking on this moment for a while, trying to make sense of the internal dissonance between my heart and brain. I've been digging at that, and I think I've come to a place that sheds some light certainly on my own humanity and maybe on y'all's, too. See, I think of myself as a rational person. I'm religious, certainly, and my spiritual side is robust enough to stand in a pulpit, but I also hold to that good ol' Three-legged Stool of scripture, tradition, and reason. I like being the kind of Christian that takes this church stuff seriously enough to ask questions. I like that tradition advises us. I especially like that we're allowed to have doubts and disagree and still come together as a community like no other. I like all that, but I

also really like imagining myself as a person of reason. So much so, that I wonder if sometimes I get so caught up in reason that I neglect emotion.

In one of my favorite churchy books, “Unapologetic,” Frances Spufford argues that couching religion vs. science as a debate gets the whole situation wrong. He says that religion is less about reason and more about emotion. Basically, belief is like falling in love. You don’t really choose it, it just happens. And then religion or something else is what you choose. Like, I didn’t choose to fall in love with my wife, but I did choose to get married. Our relationship to God is more or less the same. Reason has its place, but it’s not the only voice. Emotion matters, too. I need that reminder. It’s so easy to get caught up in the business of life, and all that business has a way of consuming our attention. I don’t know, maybe some of us were brought up to be more stoic than others, but then again, this might be a bigger problem than just your heart or mine. I’m thinking about all the people who’ve cried in my office and apologized for their tears. Why would we ever need to apologize for being in pain? For grief? For loss? And yet, listen for the times people say “I’m sorry,” and you’ll find far too many apologizing for when their emotions overwhelm. It makes me wonder if what we’re apologizing for in those moments isn’t just about reason losing control. I wonder if we’re apologizing for making someone else feel what we’re feeling. If you’ve ever sat with a tearful friend, sometimes it’s awkward and you don’t really know what to do, but sometimes, your heart aches with theirs. Maybe we apologize for making someone else bear the same burden. Maybe we don’t want to break their hearts with our pain. But y’all, that’s how we survive. We carry each other. We carry each other’s triumphs and each other’s heartbreaks. I don’t think we can survive otherwise, at least we can’t thrive otherwise. Emotion has its place, and it’s a much bigger place than we grant it.

But love? When I heard what that dying man wanted to share with y’all, I expected something exciting, vital, and uncommon. I expected earth-shattering wisdom. But while my heart warmed, my brain rolled its eyes. I’m not proud of that. I wish my brain had been along for the ride, but it was too high above the rest of the scene to benefit from that wisdom. But in time, and with a lot of inspiration from y’all, something’s become clear to me. That man’s advice to St. Thomas’ and to your priest was extraordinary. If I’d taken the time to really look at our world, I would’ve recognized the cynicism that made my cerebral detachment so powerful. There are a million reasons to hate, to fear, to retaliate. But to love? Love refuses that line of reasoning. Love, true, deep, God-filled love is exciting. Love is vital. Love is uncommon. And if we really stand in the breach with hearts and minds full of love, it is earth-shattering.

Love can be easy, but its real test comes when love is hard. Over in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus says loving those who love us is so easy it almost doesn’t count ‘cause everybody does that. What changes the world is loving our enemies, those for whom we get nothing in return, even those who seek to do us harm. That is love, and as the hymn has it, where true love is, God is there. Now, I know. Loving the lovable is easy. Loving the unlovable is hard. That’s kinda the point. We aren’t here to do easy things. To butcher a quote, we choose to love because it is hard, because everyone needs love, because everyone is human, because everyone is hurting. Much to my reason’s surprise, this was and continues to be an earth-shattering proclamation. We don’t love because everyone is right or pleasant or even kind. We love because we are God’s, and the unconditional love modeled by Christ is our purpose. We don’t have to love everything people do, but we do have to love the person.

Back on his adjustable deathbed, that old St. Thomas’ stalwart left us with one directive, the same left by so relatively few before him, the same left by Jesus himself. Love. Just love. No caveats, no exceptions, no conditions. Just love. I’m resisting the temptation to define that further or reduce it down into digestible bits. He didn’t, so I’m not going to either. Besides, as soon as I start to trim off the edges, I’d weaken his vital message. So as his keeper of last words, I’ll leave you with the abundance he left me. When the world demands you

Speak, speak with love. When the world demands you act, act with love. When the world demands you make a stand, make a stand with love. From the edge of the grave, from the corner of a room, from the lips of the dying and the arms of the cross, it's this, always this, only this: Just love.