

**SERVING THE WORLD**  
Randall Tremba  
May 17, 2015  
Seventh Sunday of Easter  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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I  
have  
learned  
so much from God  
that I can no longer  
call  
myself  
a Christian, a Hindu, a Muslim  
a Buddhist, a Jew.

The Truth has shared so much of Itself  
With me  
That I can no longer call myself  
A man, a woman, an angel,  
Or even pure  
Soul.

Love has  
Befriended Hafiz so completely  
It has turned to ash  
And freed  
Me  
Of every concept and image  
My mind has ever known.

Hafiz  
(14th century Persian Sufi Muslim)

**John 17:6-19**

*Father, I am not asking you to take my disciples out of the world. I ask you to protect them from evil. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.*

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This sermon is especially for you, our high school graduates. (Jack Barratt, Madeline Madison, Addison Murdock, Georgia Musselwhite, Madison Quinn, Will Ransom, and William Snyder.) Some of them are sitting among us today.

I graduated from high school 50 years ago. That would be 1965.

In 1965 the first Ford Mustang officially rolled out. In 1965 we were dancing to the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Elvis and Chubby Checker. Some of us shimmied under the limbo stick.

The United States was about to launch manned rockets into space on the way to a moon landing in 1969. It was a time of great optimism. We trusted and respected authority.

And then the roof fell in.

Our nation lost its way in Vietnam and couldn't get out without destroying half that beautiful country and killing a million civilians, including children. We went in to stop communist aggression only to find out the Vietnamese people considered us the aggressor.

Within a couple years fewer and fewer Americans could answer the questions: *What are we fighting for? What in the world are we doing way over there, spending billions of dollars and losing thousands of young American lives when there's plenty to take care of right here at home?*

There may be times when there are good reasons to be way over there. But never be too sure. I hope you and your generation will keep asking that question: *What in the world are we doing?*

In 1968 Martin Luther King was assassinated. Cities erupted in riots and burst into flames. The lid pressed down upon racial injustice in our society blew off. We suddenly learned the difference between tranquility and peace. We learned there could be no peace without justice. Tranquility, yes; peace, no.

Before you judge or condemn so-called rioters, I hope you will walk a mile in their shoes or better yet, imagine living a year in their neighborhoods. And the same goes for the police. Walk a mile in their shoes, too.

That's called empathy. It's a form of love and it requires deep listening.

I graduated in 1965. It was a time of great optimism. We trusted and respected authority. And then the roof fell in.

My generation began to question authority. That bumper sticker "Question Authority" was everywhere. I myself began questioning what I had been taught in church about Jesus and Christianity.

I'm pretty sure "Christian" is not part of your Facebook profile or something you want tattooed on your forehead. I'm guessing you're more ashamed than proud to be a Christian. And considering what goes for Christianity in our society, I don't blame you.

According to a recent survey, when young people like you are asked to identify as Christian, Jew, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist or None of the Above, more and more of you check "None of the Above." Hence the recent headline: *Rise of the Nones*.

And that's a good thing. I'd much rather someone else call you a Christian than you call yourself one. Christian is a far better adjective than a noun. And since you are about to graduate from high school I know you know the difference between a noun and an adjective!

Still, for better or worse, you were baptized, which is to say, initiated into this particular Christian tradition and if you should ever be out-ed I hope you can claim that identity humbly without apology. There are reasons for shame. But there are reasons for pride as well.

St. Francis is one. Mother Teresa is another. Hundreds of Presbyterians who brought education to girls in repressive societies is another. And, of course, Martin Luther King is yet another. He was—in case you didn't hear this is school—a baptized child of the church.

For me, it's more important that you live like Christ than that you call yourself a Christian. Being a Christian isn't so much about what you believe as it is about what you practice.

For you see, despite the many kinds of religions in this world, there are really only two: the religion of *being right* and the religion of *being kind*. It doesn't have to be either-or, but if you can manage only one: *be kind*.

When I questioned authority I discovered I had been misled about Jesus. I had been told over and over that Jesus is the only way to get to heaven because he said: "In my Father's house are mansions. I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me."

I don't know what you'll learn in the next 50 years, but one thing I learned was that when you take the Bible seriously, you don't take it literally. "The Father," as it turns out, is a poetic symbol. It represents our true home, where we belong. That doesn't mean some other realm beyond this world. It is right here.

Heaven is what we make or experience here on earth. "Heaven" is a better adjective than a noun. And the same goes for "Hell."

*Those who abide in love abide in God.* So when you connect the dots "in my Father's house are many mansions" can simply mean that there is plenty of room for love in this world. There are many ways and opportunities to love others.

In the gospels, "Jesus" stands for love. The way of Jesus is the way of love. So, you see, Christianity itself isn't the way the truth and the life. Love is. Love is the way, the truth and the life.

Today we send you into the world with an invitation to bear the light of Christ as St. Francis did in his day. Francis set aside the luxuries and privileges of his highborn life in order to serve the poor, the sick and the hungry in his society.

After serving as a warrior in his youth he gave up the sword and adopted the way of universal love. During a 13<sup>th</sup> century crusade when Christians and Muslims were at war he found a way to visit the sultan in Egypt several times in order to work on finding a way to peace. Love isn't soft and sentimental. It's hard work. It requires courage.

I don't know what job or career you will take up. I hope it will be a good one, constructive, challenging, wholesome and with decent pay and benefits. You may, in fact, have many jobs in your lifetime. But in the end, you have only one vocation: it is your calling through your baptism, an invitation and a sacred obligation to love God and others wholeheartedly.

The late, great B. B. King once told a workshop of budding musicians who apparently idolized him (and why not?): "It's good to have idols and mentors. But the world doesn't need another B. B. King. The world needs you to be you."

To which I would add: The world doesn't need another St. Francis, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King or even another Jesus. The world needs you to be you—full of joy, full of faithfulness, full of hope, full of love, which is to say, the world needs you fully alive.

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#### HYMN

"Make Me a Channel of Your Peace"  
(The prayer of St. Francis)