

## 1st Corinthians 15

50 This is what I'm saying, brothers and sisters: Flesh and blood can't inherit God's kingdom. Something that rots can't inherit something that doesn't decay. 51 Listen, I'm telling you a secret: All of us won't die, but we will all be changed— 52 in an instant, in the blink of an eye, at the final trumpet. The trumpet will blast, and the dead will be raised with bodies that won't decay, and we will be changed. 53 It's necessary for this rotting body to be clothed with what can't decay, and for the body that is dying to be clothed in what can't die. 54 And when the rotting body has been clothed in what can't decay, and the dying body has been clothed in what can't die, then this statement in scripture will happen: Death has been swallowed up by a victory.

55 Where is your victory, Death?

Where is your sting, Death?

(56 Death's sting is sin, and the power of sin is the Law.) 57 Thanks be to God, who gives us this victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!

## Psalms 46

46 God is our refuge and strength,

a help always near in times of great trouble.

2 That's why we won't be afraid when the world falls apart,

when the mountains crumble into the center of the sea,

3 when its waters roar and rage,

when the mountains shake because of its surging waves. Selah

4 There is a river whose streams gladden God's city,

the holiest dwelling of the Most High.

5 God is in that city. It will never crumble.

God will help it when morning dawns.

6 Nations roar; kingdoms crumble.

God utters his voice; the earth melts.

7 The Lord of heavenly forces is with us!

The God of Jacob is our place of safety. Selah

8 Come, see the Lord's deeds,

what devastation he has imposed on the earth—

9 bringing wars to an end in every corner of the world,

breaking the bow and shattering the spear,

burning chariots with fire.

10 "That's enough! Now know that I am God!

I am exalted among all nations; I am exalted throughout the world!"

11 The Lord of heavenly forces is with us!

The God of Jacob is our place of safety. Selah

## John 14

“Don’t be troubled. Trust in God. Trust also in me. 2 My Father’s house has room to spare. If that weren’t the case, would I have told you that I’m going to prepare a place for you? 3 When I go to prepare a place for you, I will return and take you to be with me so that where I am you will be too. 4 You know the way to the place I’m going.”

5 Thomas asked, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going. How can we know the way?”

6 Jesus answered, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. 7 If you have really known me, you will also know the Father. From now on you know him and have seen him.”

8 Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father; that will be enough for us.”

## Sermon

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing to you O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer:

Amen.

In our Lutheran tradition, we emphasize that funerals aren't isolated events. Instead, we come together to grieve our dead and celebrate their lives in the midst of worshipping God. This means that the person who died, while a critical element of our event, isn't our primary focus. Instead we look to the God who created that person, who baptized that person, who brought that person to the communion table, who promised that person eternal life. We look to God through that person's life and death, and we together anticipate that day when we all share in the resurrection. We come together to share in our grief, today at the loss of James C. Lefler, known as Jimmy to most of us, as well as to celebrate his life. Fortunately, we also know that Jimmy loved the God we've come to know in Jesus Christ, and devoted his life to God's

service. We're all better off because we've known Jimmy and come to know God through him.

I frequently refer to Jimmy Lefler as the best evangelist we've had since I started at CLC. Jimmy believed the Gospel in inspiring ways. His sister reflected that Jimmy gave her unconditional love his entire life, a beautiful testimony, and one that I've experienced as well. Jimmy's trust in God led the way for our faith development as a congregation, and in particular, the growth of Across the Spectrum, our ministry of inclusion for people with disabilities. Jimmy's invitations not only grew the ministries of CLC, but brought God's good news to parts of the NRV that desperately need a message of grace, of love, of worth. And he did this well.

One of my lasting public memories of Jimmy was when I was attending the Special Olympics at Radford University, and Jimmy was late for some now unimportant reason. As he arrived and hustled across the field, people called out to him and cheered

as though Beyonce just arrived. Jimmy was a local celebrity, beloved because his heart loved us all in magnificent portions. He will be missed, not just by his family, and not just by his church family at Christ Lutheran, but by the New River Valley community.

One of the saddest moments of this journey of Jimmy's illness was the inevitable point when we received word that Fairview could no longer hold Jimmy's bed. Hear me clearly: that's not a critique of the staff, for we know how much they cared for Jimmy and adored his presence. Everybody wanted that time when Jimmy could return, and none more than the Fairview staff. Rather, it's a lament of our system: everybody, at some point, can be told that there's no room for them. Children kicked out of homes. People short on mortgage payments. Any of us who have less than perfect health and less than absolute insurance. This even happened to Mary and Joseph as they prepared for the birth of our savior, so perhaps it shouldn't surprise us. And yet, the news that

we no longer have a permanent place is a grief many have faced before Jimmy and many will face in the years to come, at least until we provide a health and home care option for all our people.

Yet, the good news, the truth that awaited Jimmy and all of us along the spiritual journey, is that a room, a permanent place of belonging, awaits us in God's kingdom. God will never place an eviction notice on our doors, for by our baptism and the presence of the Holy Spirit, God claimed us as more than residents, more than renters, more than patients: God claimed us as children of the heavenly kingdom and eternal home. Jimmy trusted that in profound ways, and in the midst of our grief, we celebrate his identity as God's child, beloved and accepted just as he was.

Perhaps the most wonderful thing about Jimmy was that he showed us the truth of what abundant life looks like. His entire existence exuded an appreciation for living that wasn't inhibited by expectations or abilities, but instead grounded in the absolute joy

that life itself is worth living. That's a powerful witness for our world. Some people would look to Jimmy and pity him, and Jimmy couldn't begin to understand why. He loved life, loved to dance and bowl and set a volleyball and shoot a basketball, loved to take up the offering here at CLC. Jimmy loved what he could do rather than worried about what he couldn't do, and Jimmy trusted that, when he couldn't do something that needed to be done, others would be there, that God would provide an ever present help through the people in his life. Jimmy rejoiced in the life God gave him. We can all learn from that, about how to be satisfied with the lives that God has given us to life.

We too can learn from Jimmy about how to treat others, about the worth of others, regardless of their physical or mental abilities. Too often in our lives we draw correlations between value and ability. We think that the more someone can do, the more worth they have. Jesus exposes this as a lie on the cross, for in the

moment where Christ can do nothing, we see the ultimate value of the universe. Jimmy exposed this lie throughout his life, loving people of all sorts, helping when he could, asking for help when he needed, but always acknowledging the God-given integrity of every person. Jimmy taught us how to appreciate people by appreciating them, and Jimmy taught us how to love people by allowing us to love him. Jimmy's God-given legacy is one of value not based in ability, but based in God's presence, God's action, in his life. As Christians we say that every person is created in God's image, every one of us, and that each of us shows a unique version, a highlighted portion of God. I've never seen a truer image than the one I saw in Jimmy.

This word *selah* that we find so frequently in the Psalms is an interesting one. We don't have a certain translation for it, so most often it's left as is. Many interpreters have suggested that it was a musical direction, either for a significant transition and great pause

within the performance of the Psalm. Yet, in some church traditions, particularly in African American Christian thought, *selah* becomes an accent of importance, an amen of meaning. *Selah*, in this way, becomes the period at the end of a paragraph, but not the last page of a story. It pauses for reflection on the good of what came before, and then releases us to move into the next chapter, reading anew the material of God's resurrection.

Death, it seems, is the great *selah* of our lives. It's the pause that accentuates all the life that we lived before. It's an end, certainly, but it's not the end. It's a conclusion of one chapter of our existence, a chapter that we now reflect on, a chapter for which we give thanks, a chapter that we indeed will miss. Yet, this pause also signals the great transition from mortal to eternal life. The *selah* of death says we're ready for the page to be turned, for the Kingdom to come and God's will to be done on earth as it is indeed in heaven. St. Paul reminds us that death has been

swallowed up in victory, and we live that victory on the other side of death.

So, together, we say a last great selah for James C. Lefler. A child of God, with a room in God's house. An image of God who taught us how to appreciate all of God's images across the spectrum of ability. A brother. A friend. A sibling in Christ. We say thank you, to God and to Jimmy, for the fullness of life that Jimmy lived among us. And we turn to the next chapter, trusting that God's written Jimmy's name in the Lamb's book of life. Amen.