**9/14/23**

**My Pastor, My Mentor, and My Friend**

**John 14:1-6**

Dear family members, friends, congregation of Leah,

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (2 Corinthians 1:2 NRSV) (1) **Amen.**

I am going to start things off in a little bit of an awkward manner here with a disclaimer or notice. I want you to know that I will do my very best to hold it together and exhibit a sense of professionalism in the very presence of my own grief. My Pastor, My Mentor, and My Friend are the very reason we are all gathered here today in this space. We are here to pay memory and respect for the life she lived, the lives she touched, and the very ministry she conducted while on this earth. Praise be to God for blessing us and allowing Leah to be such a significant part of our church family and all of our lives.

Now, getting the news of someone passing away, even despite being a little more prepared for it since she had battling ailments, does not make it any easier for any one of us. I mean if I were to sit down with many of you, or even take a survey, I am pretty sure that many of you could identify or admit to having several common feelings. At one point or another you might have felt shock, disbelief, frustration, guilt, anger, and sadness over the past few days. I am even sure that a few of you may have wished you had that one final time to reach out to Leah or visit with her before her passing too. Well, I am standing here to inform you that any and all those feelings are extremely normal. They are indeed several pieces of the puzzle that we all have come to know as the grief process. Unfortunately, those feelings will not just go away, even more so, they are also extremely normal to continue to have in the days and months ahead. I want to remind you all to seek comfort in the Lord our God, and to not push those very feelings down inside. Seeking comfort and refuge in God is what he desires and asks for, and we should not be afraid to do so. I know for certain Leah would want and expect that of us.

With that being said I would like to extend condolences to the family and friends of Leah from those of us here at Holy Spirit Lutheran Church. It is indeed very hard saying good-bye to our Former Pastor and our Friend, and I know Leah will be missed greatly for sure. I also want to extend our congregation’s prayers and support to all of you, and I also want you to know that we are here for your continued prayers and support as well.

We may indeed start today’s Gospel Reading off with the words “Do not let your hearts be troubled,” and that will indeed be easier said than done in the days and months ahead. However, let us take comfort in the fact that Leah has gotten her wish. She has indeed gone home to her eternal resting place that our Lord has been so intricately and marvelously preparing for her. And… I mean if you really think about it… Leah now has access to every and any kind of Lego piece she ever needed to build any and everything imaginable! She also gets to enjoy an entirely different way of traveling through Kingdom transportation, and she has unlimited venues to go and experience.

Coming to know Leah over the years allowed me several opportunities to learn some cool things about her, I was also afforded with learning some very interesting and great things from her, and I even had to wait to learn some different things while sitting down with Ken, Cathy, and Doug the other day while preparing for this very memorial service. Now, the family and the NJ Synod both prepared beautiful synopses of her life, and I urge you to read all of that information that was shared. If you are unsure of where to find those things, let me help you, it is right in the back of the very bulletins you have in your hands. Now, I may highlight some of those things, but I am also going to share some things here that may or may have not been typed. So, with that being said, here goes nothing.

While looking for a church and congregation to join following our move down here from Pittsburgh in 2011, there was just something different about this place. Yes, the people were extremely welcoming, but it was the Pastor that drew me in for certain as well. She was different! Over time I also got to learn she was stubborn, or for what those of us like myself like to refer to it alternatively as being passionate. She indeed loved this congregation and protected it, she loved the Lord and all the blessings she could share, and she loved to share so many stories as they related to the particular Gospel Reading for that week or service. Leah indeed had a way about herself, and she carried out her ministry in that very way as well. Her upbringing and life experiences definitely shaped that for certain. We here at Holy Spirit Lutheran Church would be blessed with that very tenacity in everything she led or was a part of. Journey to Bethlehem, Vacation Bible School, The Great Bible Giveaway, Bible Study and Faith Discussions, Lenten Week Movies and Discussions, A Seder Meal right outside of those church doors in the Narthex, and so many more things I am sure I cannot account for which occurred prior to my attendance here at this church were Leah’s very contributions and stamp on things.

I also came to learn that Leah cared deeply for her family. In her pursuit of life, and the experiences and everything that it holds, she made sure that her children were cared for. I learned that much like my mother, Leah moved back in with her mother to care for and raise her children when things did not work out as expected in her marriage. Maybe this was something that drew me to Leah that I had not realized all these years. Of course, there was always the short jokes I could pull off, as she was similar in height to my mother as well. I guess I needed Leah in my life more than I had realized, and I continually come to learn and realize that God ordains things for a certain purpose for sure. Moving away from family and friends is not easy, but this church and congregation quickly became our new family. Leah filled a temporary void, and she continued to help shape and mentor me that I will forever be thankful for.

Alright, as I am sure I probably teared up a little bit there, and made things a little more personal than I expected, let me share just a little more with you before we move on to our focus on the Gospel Reading today. I learned that Leah had tried out to be a NJ State Trooper. However, hurting her knee badly during that process would prevent her from having that particular life experience. God had different plans for sure. In those very plans, I was even more shocked to learn that in Leah’s pursuit of education and ministry she would be one of the few people that would find a way of enrolling and taking classes in seminary before they even realized she had not completed her bachelor’s degree. Yep, that would be Leah! Never following the so-called rules!

She was indeed called to ministry, and called to love on each and every one of us that were blessed to be a part of her life. Now, her and I may have not always seen eye to eye. We also may have practiced who might be more correct in a particular situation. However, we always had a level of respect for one another, a love for one another, and more importantly a focus on completing the goal at hand with God’s help. When she eventually came to me to inform me that she had to retire she informed me she was going to be doing it her way, and I would expect nothing less. Leah did not give us a long time to prepare, and she did not give our congregation a long time to make the transition. After all, she did not want the focus to be on her. She served in ministry for several years, and unfortunately her health was causing many different things she could have never imagined or ever desired to experience. She had told several people that even when she had met me the first time, and had looked into my eyes, that she indeed felt I would be the next one standing up here taking over after her. This level of respect and admiration she held for me will forever make me continue forging forward in my quest of education and ministry.

Today I am also here to share with you and remind you that “The resurrection is the center of Christian funerals—or at least it should be. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is our hope. As Paul writes to the Corinthians, if Jesus did not rise from the dead then we are of all people to be pitied the most.” (5)

“It is popular now to talk about funerals being a “celebration of life.” Certainly, remembering and celebrating the impact that the person has had upon us is important—but this isn’t the main reason we gather as Christians. Christians gather to hear the Word of God proclaimed that there is life after death and to celebrate this truth—this reality.” (5) Now, thankfully, “Jesus doesn’t give us a long list of instructions on what to do to get to heaven. Instead, he comes to guide us. When you have someone who has walked the path before and who knows the way, you can be assured that you will arrive at your destination and that you do not need to worry or fear.” (5)

We are also comforted and forever reminded that, “When we have questions about death we need to stop and listen, listen to Jesus and hear His word which tells us, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me." but it can be hard advice. This is no time for trite words, and easy assurances. We do not like to think about death if we have any doubts about our own readiness. But still Jesus says, “Do not let your hearts be troubled."” (4) “One of the promises that Jesus makes to his disciples is, “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.” Though death may separate us from our family and friends—at least for a time—we will never be separated from Jesus.” (5)

I also know for certain that “The days, weeks, and months ahead are going to be rough, you’ll have good days and bad days, you’ll miss a mother, a sister, a grandmother, an aunt, a Pastor, and a friend; but if there’s one thing that will get you through that, is grace. Look around today, see all these faces here? We’re all here to show that love and grace that Christ first gave to us by continuing to love and support each other today and in the future.” (2) Leah “…would want to see that each one of us here today knows that just as Jesus prepared a place for her, that He is preparing a place for each one of us, and that one day, He will call us from this life of pain, tears, and strife, to an eternal life of joy, peace, and comfort!” (3) We know for certain that “Death has been conquered by the cross of Christ. There is life after death—life with Jesus.” (5)

As we look forward to our continued life on this ball of mud, as we imagine what our message and ministry might be, and as we imagine what our lives might be without Leah. We can sit back and say Thank You Lord! We can thank the Lord our God for blessing us with Leah in our lives. We can thank God for the pictures and the memories. We can thank God for the impact Leah had on each and every one of us. We do indeed thank God for this good and faithful servant that has now been called to eternal rest and salvation.

Amen.

**References**

(1) Bible.com

(2) SermonCentral.com

Grace

Contributed by Christopher Martin on Dec 18, 2007

Scripture: John 14:1-6

Denomination: Lutheran

(3) SermonCentral.com

"Freda's Homecoming"

Contributed by Christopher Martin on Dec 18, 2007

Scripture: John 14:1-6

Denomination: Lutheran

(4) SermonCentral.com

Do Not Let Your Hearts Be Troubled

Contributed by Christopher Raiford on Sep 2, 2004

Scripture: John 14:1-6

Denomination: Lutheran

(5) SermonCentral.com

Fear Of Life's Final Moments Series

Contributed by Kevin Ruffcorn on Feb 2, 2010

Scripture: John 14:1-6

Denomination: Lutheran

**John 14:1-6**

1Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. 2In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? 3And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. 4And you know the way to the place where I am going." 5Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" 6Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

**NJ SYNOD OBITUARY**

Blessed Are They Who Die in the Lord

The Rev. Leah Louise Lavelle

January 10, 1947 – September 10, 2023

﻿The Rev. Leah Louise Lavelle, retired, entered the Church Triumphant on September 10, 2023 while in hospice care. Arrangements will be held on Thursday, September 14, at Holy Spirit Lutheran Church, Villas. Visitation will take place beginning at 10:00 a.m., followed by a memorial liturgy at 11:00 a.m.

Pastor Lavelle, born in Upland, Pennsylvania, earned a B.A. in Science and Math from Thomas A. Edison State College, Trenton, and a M. Div. from Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia (now United Lutheran Seminary.) Before and during seminary, Leah was a member of St. John Lutheran in Ocean City, an EMT in Atlantic City, and then a paramedic for the West Jersey Health System in Camden.

Pastor Lavelle was ordained a minister of Word and Sacrament on July 5, 1998, and served as the pastor of Holy Trinity, Union, a congregation of the Slovak Zion Synod. The congregation of Holy Spirit, Villas, called Leah who then transferred to the NJ Synod. In an interview in The Press of Atlantic City, early in her ministry in Villas, Leah reflected on prayer. “Prayer gives me comfort and strength. I just love helping people relate to God, especially in their rough times, perhaps in their grief. Faith and prayer, along with caring friends, can help in any situation.”

Pastor Lavelle served Holy Spirit from 2007 until her retirement in June 2022.

She is survived by her son Kenneth and daughter Catherine (Douglas Ryan) and their families.

**EVOY’S OBITUARY**

Leah L. Lavelle, 76, passed away peacefully at her home in Villas, NJ, on Sunday, September 10, 2023, after a long battle with a neurodegenerative disease. Leah was born on January 10, 1947, in Upland, PA, just outside of Philadelphia. She was the third of five children of Edgar Gordon and Louise (Warren) Boyce. While she was a child, she moved with her family to Ocean City, NJ, where she graduated High School. Leah married Robert Jude Lavelle in Ocean City, NJ, in June 1968. Son Ken was born in August 1971, and Cathy in October 1973. Leah volunteered with the Blairstown, NJ, Rescue Squad, and became an EMT. After splitting with Robert in 1980, Leah, Ken, and Cathy moved to Ocean City and lived with Leah's mom, Louise. Leah became a paramedic, working in this field for many years. Many EMTs and Paramedics are grateful for the mentorship she provided to them. She then went back to school and became an Ordained Lutheran Minister in 1998. She was a pastor at Grace Lutheran Church in Union NJ, and then at Holy Spirit Lutheran church in Villas, NJ. Leah was also a writer and published short stories and children's logic puzzles in Highlights Magazine. She loved games of all types, including Hearts and Scrabble. Leah would spot Ken and Cathy points in Scrabble when they were children, to have a competitive game, until they became good enough to win on their own. Leah enjoyed visiting Cathy and her husband Doug in Vermont, which always included some Scrabble competitions. The games continued during Covid via Zoom video calls. Once while visiting Cathy, Leah took an interest in Cathy's Lego Christmas scene. She said she wanted a Lego nativity scene, and after Cathy told her that Lego doesn't do religious scenes, she said, "Then I'll just have to build my own". Thus began a hobby of building with Lego bricks that lasted the rest of her life. She loved building scenes from the bible and displaying them at church. Leah had an adventurous spirit and enjoyed traveling, going to Hawaii and Alaska multiple times and to China once. Her first Alaska trip was in 2001, with Cathy and Doug, shortly after they met. Leah is predeceased by her parents; her brother Fred Boyce and sister-in-law (wife of Jim Boyce) Dorothy "Dot" Boyce. Leah is survived by her children, Kenneth G. Lavelle and Catherine Leah (Douglas) Ryan; her siblings Jim Boyce, Judy (Bill) Gourley, and Linda Forrester; her two granddaughters; and many nieces, nephews, and grand-nieces and grand-nephews. Pastor Leah's Memorial Service will be held on Thursday, September 14th at Holy Spirit Lutheran Church in Villas, NJ. Family and friends will be received from 10-11 a.m., and the Memorial Service will be at 11 a.m. A luncheon will immediately follow the service.