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Love Boldly. Serve Joyfully. Lead Courageously.

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These are the words that **hung large and vibrantly on huge banners** displayed on the stage at the Minnesota Annual Conference a few weeks ago. Annual Conference is, well, an annual time for clergy and laity from all across the state **to gather in community with one another and to do the administrative work of the church.** We voted on constitutional changes and many other things addressing the business of the church. **But also,** it is designed to be a **life-giving time of learning.**

We heard multiple addresses from Bishop Lanette Plambeck that were inspiring and realigning. Rev. Dr. Tim Eberhart, a professor from Garrett where I will be completing my seminary degree, was the keynote throughout conference and spoke at length about the sacred connection between our faith and our earth.

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Boiled down, that was the message from the Bishop to every church in the conference, including here at Love First UMC.

As many of you know, our church is officially called “The First United Church of the St. Cloud Region.” See why we needed a name change? A few years ago, at a different annual conference event, Pastor Leah was profoundly inspired by the address given by a different Bishop, of a church centered on love. That inspiration led to us embracing the name **Love First UMC.**

But it wasn't just about picking a catchy name. From the very beginning, we committed ourselves to making "Love First" not just a title we claim, but a truth we strive to live out every single day. It's **a constant aspiration, a guiding principle** that shapes how we worship, how we serve our community, and how we interact with each other.

It means that in every decision, every outreach, every welcome, **we believe that love comes first.**

It's no wonder that the Bishop's message to "Love Boldly" resonates so deeply with who we are.

Today we are continuing our journey through the four sacred phrases that Dr. Ira Byock outlines in his book “The Four Things that Matter Most.”

In the spirit of the Conference theme, today, we focus on perhaps the most fundamental of these phrases: "I love you." Not as mere sentiment, **but as the active, life-giving force** that Paul describes when he writes to the Philippians with joy in his heart (from prison mind you!), and that Jesus models throughout his entire ministry—even to his death.

"I love you." **Three small words.**

How often do we wait to say them? Wait for the perfect moment? For assurance that they'll be returned? For courage?

And yet in today's scriptures, we find that **love is never passive.**

Paul's love for the Philippians, and perhaps his dire circumstances, **moves him** to prayer, to thanksgiving, and to boldly express his love.

Envision that now for a moment. **Paul in a Roman jail cell writing this letter of love and encouragement.**

I looked it up, wanting to really understand the situation. I learned most Roman cells were often underground. There would have been very little light, poor ventilation, extreme cold or heat depending on the season. There was likely nothing of comfort, not even to sleep on. Many had chains and stocks. Equipment of torture. Little or sometimes no food or water.

And yet from **this place of extreme pain and isolation** Paul's letter says JOY, LOVE, GLORY, and PRAISE.

And then in our scripture from John, Jesus' love for his disciples compels him toward the ultimate sacrifice: He tells his disciples "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

This love is not romantic or abstract. It is **self-giving**, and **sacrificial**.

On the whole, the commandments of Jesus are not general or scattered but focused and specific: Love, as we see it lived out in these passages and throughout the entire Bible, is an **active verb**.

If we take seriously our call to **live this love**, it requires something of us. It asks us to **move beyond** our comfort zones, **beyond** our fears, **beyond** our pride.

It does something in us.

It costs us.

And it completes us.

Whether we think of **Jesus's death on the cross** or of **any experience we ourselves have had** – a near death experience, the death of a loved one, or our normal curiosity of what awaits us after our own death...

I have come to believe that **death has a way of sharpening our focus**. It clarifies what really matters.

I believe death is one of the most traumatic and sacred events we can experience. Not just for the one who is dying—but for those who remain. It is a time when, as the mystics say, **the veil grows thin**. Time slows. And something eternal presses close.

I had never been present at someone's death until 2022—when both my father-in-law and my father passed away just months apart.

I was there as they both had very different end of life experiences.

It was devastating. It was disorienting. **And it was holy.**

It absolutely changed me.

When my dad was dying, I didn't understand everything that was happening—but I knew **it was sacred**. And somehow, I just knew what needed to be said.

My mom, my sisters, and I had gathered at the hospital early one morning when my older sister, who is a nurse, could clearly articulate for us that our dad would die. Before that, we had all been *very focused* on him living. On fighting the cancer that he had been diagnosed with just 6 months earlier.

As soon as I arrived, I remember **I felt very clearly and boldly led by the Holy Spirit** to gather my family around his hospital bed. And we began a conversation rooted in the same spirit as Dr. Byock's four phrases.

We told my dad he had been a good father. A devoted husband. A faithful servant of his country.

That he had fought cancer with courage and humility. We told him **he could let go**.

And then, we told him **we loved him**, over and over.

Despite, at this point, not always being able to communicate, through his pain, he spoke the words back: **“I love you.” One last time.**

Several hours later, taking nearly half a day, he passed away.

Those final hours were gut-wrenching. Yet I truly believe **holy work was happening** in my dad throughout that time and I would not have wished to be anywhere else.

In those moments of love and loss, **something awakened in me.**

That is where I first felt the nudge of a call stirring within me—a call to ordained ministry.

A call to stand with people in their most vulnerable moments.

A call to speak words that matter.

And after all **isn’t naming and sharing God’s love** each of our calls as Christians? No matter if you do that from a pew or from the pulpit, we are called again to...

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We often think of death as the end of the story. But Byock reframes it: not as a period at the end of a sentence, but as **a circle drawn to completion**—whole, reconciled, and at peace.

Jesus says, “I have said these things so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”

Completion is not something that only happens at the end of life.

The good news is that it can happen every day, in every relationship, when we choose to love.

Each of us will face moments when life breaks us open—through grief, loss, conflict, or change. And in those moments, we have a choice:

We can choose to shut down.
We can choose anger, blame, or withdrawal.
Or... we can ask: **What does love ask of me now?**

This is not easy work. Love makes demands.
It asks us to set down our pride.
To risk vulnerability.
To speak words we may have long held back.

But love is also **the force that heals**. That binds and brings peace. And there is no greater example of this than that love of God displayed through the death of his son, Jesus, on the cross.

When we say and live “I love you,” we become more like Christ.
We learn to carry both sorrow and joy.
We learn to stay present, even in pain.
We learn to reconcile and to forgive.

Do you see the beautiful progression here? First, we **love boldly**—not tentatively or conditionally, but with the same extravagant love that God has poured out on us.

When we love boldly, something miraculous happens: joy begins to bubble up from within us, not because our circumstances are perfect, but because we are **connected to the very source of joy itself**.

And when we **serve joyfully**—when our service flows from hearts filled with God's love and sustained by divine joy—we discover we're no longer serving out of obligation or guilt, but out of **the overflow of what God has done in us**.

This joy-filled service becomes contagious, transforming not just those we serve, but ourselves in the process.

And God doesn't stop there. The love that emboldens us and the joy that sustains us now calls us to something more: to **lead courageously**. Not with the world's understanding of leadership that grasps for power, but with the **courage that comes from knowing we are chosen, called, and sent** by the God of the universe.

So here is our charge as we leave this place today: Take the love you've received and **love boldly** in a world that desperately needs to hear "I love you."

Take the joy that flows from that love and **serve joyfully**, even when service is difficult.

And then—then **step forward as courageous leaders**, knowing that the same love that transformed you has the power to transform our church, our community, and our world.

This is the **very essence** of what it means to be **Love First**. Our name is not merely a label, but **a living commitment**—a constant aspiration to embody the radical, transformative **love of God** in every facet of our lives.

As we go from this place, let us carry **that commitment into the world**, allowing every interaction, every decision, every act of service, big or small, to be a testament **to the truth that love comes first**, not just in our name, but in **the very core** of who we are as followers of Christ.

May you be **both givers and receivers** of God's sacred love.

May you **speak** the words that matter.

And may your **joy be made complete**, as we live out our calling to be truly and authentically "Love First."

In the name of the One who loved us first, and loves us still.

Amen.