

May 19, Easter 5C (John 13:31-35)

Here we find Jesus speaking in language both mystical and matter of fact.

by [Aisha Brooks-Lytle](#) in the [May 8, 2019](#) issue

Two and a half years before my husband died, I asked him a question. “What do you want our son to know about life after you are gone?”

Carl paused and thought awhile—as he generally did, due to the impact of his rare degenerative neurological condition. Then he said he wanted Ellington to know that God and family are more important than a job or success. Since he was giving out advice, I asked him what he wanted for me. This time he didn’t miss a beat.

He told me that I needed to practice the piano. Piano proficiency would help me as a jazz vocalist, singer-songwriter, and worship leader.

I was not expecting such practical advice from a man who knew that his time on the earth was short. But in retrospect, it makes sense. Carl could have talked about existential realities and theological discourse. But in the end, just as he wanted our son to know that loving God and others is above all, he also wanted me to know that stewardship of my gifts is important for the particularity of my call and mission.

It has been a year since Carl died. My son is embodying his father’s practical wisdom. I purchased a digital piano for my room. It is clear that Carl has left behind a legacy through his loving, thoughtful, and practical wisdom.

When I read again these familiar words of Jesus offering his disciples this new commandment, I read them as the words of a dying man. He knows that pain is close at hand but also that so much possibility will spring forth from what follows. The words and actions of Jesus in John 13 are those of a man who knows that he is not long for this world but is filled with energy and excitement about what lies on the other side.

In this week's reading, we find Jesus speaking in language both mystical and matter of fact. Having demonstrated the loving act of foot washing, Jesus now speaks about his own nature and his entwined relationship with God. Even as death approaches, he presents his painful reality as a picture framed in glory. God is being glorified through Christ's earthly demonstration of love, compassion, peace, and justice.

I can only imagine what the disciples are thinking. Jesus sounds as if he is looking to the skies and contemplating the meaning of life as God in the flesh. I can imagine him almost talking out loud to himself as he considers the mystery of his existence and his relationship with his heavenly parent. And then, in this moment of veiled theological self-dialogue, Jesus seems to realize that he has an opportunity to offer some practical advice to his most intimate followers. Jesus prepares them for a life that will no longer be the same, because he has to leave them. Yet he leaves them with a command and a charge that will have the power to transform the world. Jesus leaves the disciples with a legacy of love.

These words are not exactly new. The command to love God and neighbor echoes from the Shema to the law and the prophets to Christ's own teachings. But these words here are the sweet and sincere words of a man who knows he is going to die. Jesus wants his most intimate followers to understand what is most important. Like a man in hospice care hoping to leave his last bit of wisdom to his family, Jesus is leaving a legacy for his children to lift up and carry forward in his name.

He is calling on them to love. It is this love among themselves that will be unleashed on the world. It is this love that will be the greatest declaration of their identity as disciples. This dying man imagines his followers turning the world on its head by loving one another in the face of denial and betrayal. He knows how they will behave at the time of his arrest, conviction, and crucifixion. Yet he can see them loving each other even as they scatter and are filled with fear. Jesus dreams of leaving a legacy that invites them to love each other in the midst of conflict, name-calling, and deep division. He draws them close like a dying man's last inhalation and gives them this timeless command as his last exhalation.

The tender words of Jesus speak to us loud and clear. Love has always been and will always be the answer for the followers of Christ. Jesus loved us enough to lay down his life, and he loved us enough to leave us a legacy that will lead us to hope in the midst of the brokenness we see. Will we carry on the legacy that Christ commands, or will we fall into the temptation to do things our own way? It is easy to rationalize

our way out of loving one another. We want to qualify love. We want to complicate it by adding stipulations as to who is worthy to receive it and who is not. We want to pat ourselves on the back for tolerating the unlovable and loving those we tolerate. It is not easy to live out a dying man's legacy or uphold the wishes of the dying.

The good news is that Christ's dying words were not his last words or actions with us. God raised Jesus from the dead, and the risen Christ walks with us, talks with us, reveals our rough spots, and cleanses us. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ shows us how to love each other each new day.