Graduation season is underway this weekend as colleges, universities and seminaries across the country hold their commencement exercises. Inevitably these include a keynote address by some renowned dignitary, as well as a shorter speech by the valedictorian or senior class president. Having attended several such ceremonies in the last few years and having heard the commensurate speeches, I must admit not remembering anything particularly profound. Mind you, I thought most were well and good, even admirable, at the time. At Wake Forest University last spring a woman in the higher echelons of PepsiCo (and probably on the school’s board of trustees) delivered the address at daughter Mary’s graduation. As I recall, the businesswoman spoke about building a meaningful life and making a difference in the world. Details nonetheless elude me. At son Evans’ seminary graduation in California, I seem to remember the outgoing interim president delivering a fine speech, and the baccalaureate sermon by a female professor of Old Testament was stellar, but again, I can recall no specifics, not even their names. Perhaps my fogginess has as much to do with aging brain cells as it does with any graduation weekend. Still, it is depressing to imagine that carefully crafted orations meant to launch a body of individuals into the world should not really be heard … perhaps not unlike sermons!

Life teems with pivotal moments when change looms around the corner, and a parent or teacher, a leader or loved one, seeks to impart pithy, veritable wisdom to see us through the next turn, if not the rest of our days. As a mother, I recall this feeling on my son Evans’ first day of kindergarten – forget that he had been in pre-school since he was just over a year old. Kissing him goodbye at the classroom door, I wondered if there was not something essential that I needed to tell him before he began this new chapter of life. Fast forward 13 years, and there I was again, hugging Evans with tears in my eyes and a touch of panic in my heart, anxious to convey some important word before he began college over 500 miles away. I do not know if this feeling ever wanes, but I admit to having it again just four years ago when our son got married. I wanted to sit Evans down on a sofa, and warn him of the severe challenges which accompany the inherent joys of marriage. It seems to me that whenever these passages occur in our lives, the teacher or parent is overcome with the desire to take their dear one’s face gently in both hands, look them in the eye and say, “Just remember this.”
Just remember that I love you, says the mother to her six year old getting out of the car.

Just remember that it’s only a game, says the coach to his team after a tough loss.

Just remember to relax, encourages the teacher to her piano student before a recital.

Just remember, I believe in you, says the father to his daughter heading off to med school.

Just remember: forgiveness is the key, says the pastor to the bride and groom.

In today’s scripture lesson Jesus seems to be wrestling with the arduous task of saying goodbye. Chapters 14-17 of John’s gospel, often referred to as “The Final Discourse,” include poignant, beautiful teachings of Jesus. The Master has lived with and taught this group of disciples for three years, and now he fears that his end is near — that he will be arrested, if not executed, for bucking the system and naming injustice. Over a communal meal and plenty of wine, Jesus essentially gives his last lecture, imparting his final wisdom, underscoring the command to love one another as he has loved them. He covers some new ground saying, “I no longer call you servants, but friends” and “You did not choose me, but I chose you.” However, the overall message echoes with the words, “abide in my love, and love one another.” It sounds as if Jesus is saying, “Just remember this: abide in my love.” The larger context hums along with rather esoteric language, “Abide in me as I abide in you. I am in my Father and you in me, and I in you.” This is not literal speech, but spiritual language communicating a mystical fluidity whereby God dwells in us, and we dwell in God.

Abide is not a word we use on a daily basis. In fact, it’s sort of an old word, found more in poetry or literature than in everyday speech. Abide means “to dwell, to reside or remain, to be with.” In his Message version of the Bible, Eugene Peterson expresses it this way, “Make yourselves at home in my love.” Make yourselves at home. What does it mean to make ourselves at home in Christ’s love? To live with it? To be comfortable with it? To rest in God’s love?

Maybe it begins with simply being aware, becoming conscious of God. When he returned from a three month sabbatical, Rev. William Brosend was asked what he had learned that would help the church. He replied, “The most important thing I learned is how to breathe in and breathe out.” Brosend was serious, noting that in learning to sit quietly he was growing in his awareness of Jesus’ presence and abiding love.

Brosend’s comment brought to mind my experience with yoga, which I began practicing at the end of my own sabbatical several years ago. Yoga promotes health through the stretching of limbs and balance poses, but as one teacher says, “It’s all about the breathing.” Breath is the fuel of yoga, which cultivates a greater connection between mind and body. Yoga has helped me become more conscious of the present, precious moment — of life — and of the One in whom we live and move and have our being. [The final exhortation of a yogi would be, “Just remember to breathe!”]
Rev. Brosend shared that he had been inspired by two excellent teachers: 17th century French monk Brother Lawrence who wrote about practicing the presence of God as he washed dishes or swept the kitchen in the monastery, and contemporary Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh who describes how love is the highest form of abiding, that is, being present with another. Listening intently and looking deeply into another person in order to understand their needs, this is the ground of real love.ii

To be a Christian is to live in God’s love, and to trust that love. Alex Tyree worked as a grief counselor for Delaware Hospice. He was a cancer survivor, a husband and father, and a caring, joyful Christian. When his cancer returned after 18 years in remission, Alex pursued treatment until his doctors told him there was nothing else to do. Alex continued to embrace every day of his life, taking a special trip with his wife and son, spending quality time with friends and family, and blogging on the Caring Bridge website about his faith and trust in the Big Love. Alex believed this Big Love is in every person, and Big Love is that from whom we come and to whom we go. Alex’s term for God – Big Love – may sound simplistic or irreverent. But the writer of the first letter of John said something similar. “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. … God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.”

In his final lecture, Jesus says that it all comes down to this: Live in God’s love, and live out of God’s love. It sounds so easy, but if it were, we would not spend our lives searching for love and acceptance in fame, fortune, relationships, and selfish pleasure. Jesus yearns for us to know the joy and meaning that come from living, dwelling, abiding in God’s love. It’s that love which will not let us go, that love that seeks to expand in our lives, spilling over into selfless, compassionate care for others. Such Love has the power to heal the world.

After worship one Sunday a usually irate church member said to the pastor, “I’m so glad you preached an historical sermon today.” Shocked by this unexpected praise, the preacher beamed, and the member continued, “yes, because I’m sick and tired of hearing about love all the time!”

Can there really be too much emphasis on the love of God? One esteemed theologian has said, “I believe, that if nothing else, every worshipper should leave service each Sunday having heard in some manner, ‘I am loved by God.’”

And so I say to you today, Just remember this: God loves you.

This is what life is all about: living in and out of this Big Love.

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