Sermon at Requiem for The Very Rev. Karl Lusk.
First Christian Church, Bardstown, KY.
August 10, 2019

Nine years ago next week, I was unpacking books in my new office. I was the bishop-elect, having not yet been ordained and consecrated a bishop. The bishop I would succeed had graciously moved out of the bishop’s office allowing me to begin unpacking. It was my second or third day, and I was reeling from all the transition. A priest appeared in my doorway, with a big smile on his face. He introduced himself, said he was in the diocesan office for a meeting, but first wanted to say hi and welcome. And then he said, “I know being bishop will be a huge adjustment, and you must be as nervous as a long tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs!” And that’s how I met Father Karl Lusk!

Over the years, Karl said to me a couple of times: If you are the bishop when I die, don’t make the sermon about me, make it about Jesus.

Well Karl, I appreciate your counsel – but I’m the bishop! I think I can speak about Jesus AND you, and it will turn out just fine!

The Gospel reading describes Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Our Lord says, “I know my own and my own know me.” Just look around at this packed church. For Church of the Ascension parishioners, patients and staff colleagues at Flaget Hospital, law enforcement personnel, EMTs, fire fighters, disaster response teams, city and county and state officials, the people of St. Thomas’ Church in Campbellsville, the ecumenical community here and the broader Episcopal Diocese of Kentucky, the New Haven and Bardstown communities, and many others: Jesus the Good Shepherd was present throughout Father Karl’s life. He had that knack of connecting with people because he genuinely loved people. He rightly saw us all as God’s beloved children, and thus, as his sisters and brother. The most common phrases used to describe Karl this week: a good guy, a good man, a kind man, a compassionate priest.

Karl lived by Jesus’ response to the question of what does it all the law and the prophets come down to. Jesus replied: you love God with all you heart and mind and strength, with everything you have. AND you love your neighbor the same way.

To love God means your neighbor is your concern, every neighbor (there’s no asterisk there indicating see a footnote listing the exceptions). Love all people, in concrete ways, everything you’ve got.

Our Lord repeats this priority for his disciples and for us, on the night before he died, when he said: A new commandment I give you. Love one another as I have loved you. This is how the world will know you follow me, this is how people know I am your Shepherd, if you use everything you’ve got to love one another.
Karl shared God’s love with countless souls, and often times in the midst of great pain and loss. To victims and families, to first responders and medical professionals, to those who worked in funeral homes, and to clergy colleagues who cared for the grieving even as they were grieving themselves – he shared the love and compassion and peace of the Good Shepherd. He was a vessel of hope and light and life.

And here is something so important: Karl never used Jesus as a hammer, never used Jesus to threatened people as if God’s love for all was predicated on doing this or not doing that. He met people where they were in their life and faith journeys. He found Christ in them.

Karl was judgmental, and I mean that in the best sense of that word! He refused to accept God being invoked as a justification to deny another person’s God-given dignity. If you ever needed to find Karl, you usually found him with someone who was hurting. He embraced the marginalized. His preaching brought comfort to the afflicted, and could afflict the comfortable. He found such willing fellow servants at Church of the Ascension, and during his time as rector that parish grew in serving the people of Bardstown and Nelson County.

In an interview a few years ago, Karl referred to himself as a country parson. “Parson” is a venerable term for Anglicans and Episcopalians. “Parson” derives from a medieval word for persona or representation. The village priest was the image and presence of Christ to the village, and further, the parson belonged to the whole village where his cure of souls was located, parishioner and non-parishioner alike, believer and non-believer. The parson, warts and all, vowed to care for every single soul.

We all belonged to Karl, he was our parson, and God blessed us through him. He was scary smart, in terms of both intellect and emotional intelligence, but that seemed to never get in the way of connecting with him.

Most dear to his heart – his beloved Anne, and their family – children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren. He loved his sister Marty, she loved her brother. To all of you - I want you to know that he bragged on y’all, sharing accomplishments and milestones, and his pride and love overflowed in that bragging. He would remind me, “It isn’t bragging if it’s true!”

On a personal note, I was his pastor as his bishop, but Karl was also a friend. That’s a tricky relationship to maintain. But ever faithful and appropriate, Karl could walk that line. In the midst of certain challenges, he offered encouragement and always asked: what can I do help? When my younger brother died last year, Karl checked in often, reminding me that grief is related to our love for the one who has died, and that it takes as long as it takes to mourn.
I think many of us will take his words to heart now, and for as long as it takes.

As I’ve gone on for awhile, I can hear Karl saying, “Bishop, you remind of the preacher who gets in the pulpit and takes off her wrist watch and sets it down on the pulpit desk so she can see it. People think that’s so she can keep track of the time. Do you know what that really means?”

“No, Karl, what does it mean?”

“No a dadgum thing!!”

So let me conclude with this:

In the fourth century, the Emperor Constantine decreed that Christians could worship freely and openly, rather than in secret and at the risk of persecution. As churches were built, adjacent churchyards for burial were also created, running west to east. No longer were believers buried in catacombs. It became the tradition to bury Christians with the head oriented at the west end of the grave. The reason being that Jesus would come again from the east, like the rising of the sun. Thus, at the sound of the archangel’s trumpet, the faithful would sit up, and be facing east, so that they could behold their Lord and Savior. But the exception to that practice was this: a priest was buried with his head at the east end of the grave, so that when the trumpet sounded, the priest would sit up facing west, facing the people he had served, and he would behold his salvation in his Lord and Savior by gazing into the faces of the people he served.

Father Karl’s body here is laid out similarly, he is facing you. And in your faces, the glory of God is reflected, and your love for his priest Karl is abundantly clear. Karl felt ever so privileged to be able to serve you and tell you how completely and unconditionally you are loved by God in Christ Jesus. Thank you for loving and appreciating this servant. May we all go and do likewise, love all people. Thank you for taking care of Anne and their family in the days ahead with your prayers and acts of love.

And Karl, my brother, my friend: well done, good and faithful priest. Faithful parson and shepherd, following the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ: very well done. Rest now in peace, and rise in glory at the Last Day. What a reunion we will all have!

Thank you, Karl. Amen.