

# The Words We Cannot Bear to Hear

John 16.12-15

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‘I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.’

Since it’s graduation Sunday, I’m supposed to give you graduates advice on how to best live your life, sort of like Polonius gave his son Laertes in *Hamlet*:

Give thy thoughts no tongue...  
Be thou familiar, but by no means vulgar.  
Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,  
Grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel...

...Beware  
Of entrance to a quarrel, but being in,  
Bear't that the opposed may beware of thee.  
Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice;  
Take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgment...

Neither a borrower nor a lender be;  
For loan oft loses both itself and friend...

This above all: to thine ownself be true,  
And it must follow, as the night the day,  
Thou canst not then be false to any man.

But I don't really want to spend this sermon quoting Shakespeare. Let me quote something else—movie musicals. Did you know that most movie musicals, especially cartoons, feature a song called the “I Wish” song? It's usually the very first song sung by the one of the main characters. According to Ira Glass of *This American Life*, the tradition began as far back as 1937, in Walt Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the first full-length color cartoon. It begins with Snow White singing to her reflection in a wishing well, in a voice so high it almost sounds falsetto,

I'm wishing (*I'm wishing*) for the one I love  
To find me (*to find me*) today (*today*)...

“I Wish” songs are in lots of Disney features, like *The Little Mermaid* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, or, in a movie my youngest daughter has seen about four times, *Frozen*. I once saw a group of six and seven year old girls at camp spontaneously start singing, “Let It Go,” but that's not the “I Wish” song in that movie. The “I Wish” song in *Frozen* is sung by Anna, near the beginning. It's called “The First Time in Forever.” And since my rendition of the Snow White song will remind you that my singing voice would drive a dog off of a meat wagon, I've asked the lovely and gracious Sarah Cook to sing this one:

*Sarah:* 'Cause for the first time in forever  
There'll be music, there'll be light!  
For the first time in forever  
I'll be dancing through the night...

Don't know if I'm elated or gassy  
But I'm somewhere in that zone!  
'Cause for the first time in forever  
I won't be alone.

But “I Wish” songs aren’t just in cartoons. As Ira Glass points out, Stephen Sondheim’s *Into the Woods* has six separate characters singing their various “I Wish” songs in the opening number. *Fiddler on the Roof* has the oldest daughter singing,

*Sarah:* Matchmaker, Matchmaker,  
Make me a match,  
Find me a find,  
Catch me a catch.

The most famous “I Wish” song of all is in *The Wizard of Oz*, when Judy Garland’s Dorothy sings,

*Sarah:* Somewhere over the rainbow  
Way up high,  
There’s a place that I’ve heard of  
Once in a lullaby...

Anyway, you get the idea. Near the beginning, a major character declares what they are wishing for, and the trajectory of the film has to do with how that wish is fulfilled (or not). The wish isn’t fulfilled right away, because then there would be no movie. No, the singer has to work, and strive, and sometimes suffer, to get that dream fulfilled.

That's sort of the way it is with our graduates. You've done something really important. You did it in order to fulfill a life wish. But if your life is like a movie, it's barely begun.

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I suspect that the last couple of weeks, you've heard how great you are. It's fitting and proper that you should hear that now, because in graduating you have done something really important and we're very proud of you. Savor the moment, and enjoy the view from the top of the hill, because it won't last. Pretty soon, our college-bound high school graduates will be back at the bottom of the hill as freshmen, and our college graduates will be looking for jobs. In the near future, some of you may hear hard words you don't want to hear, words like, "You don't meet our academic standards" or "We decided to hire somebody else." That's life, or rather, that's part of life. But hard words aren't the end of your life story.

Jesus had to speak hard words in our scripture lesson to disciples who didn't want to hear them. He was with them the night before his crucifixion, and he was trying to prepare them for his departure. But they didn't understand what he was trying to say. They didn't comprehend that the next day their beloved Lord would be tortured to death on a cross; they didn't anticipate that he would be raised from the dead; they absolutely didn't comprehend that forty days after that he would ascend into heaven. The fact that Jesus told them that some mysterious being whom he called

“the Advocate” and “the Spirit of truth” would be taking his place didn’t ease either their foreboding or their perplexity. “I still have many things to say to you,” Jesus said, “but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.” *I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.*

In the course of our lives, we will hear things like that many times, words we do not think we can bear to hear. Because people tend to be empathetic more often than not, those hard words will often be prefaced with other words like, “I’m sorry,” or “I hate to say this, but...” “I hate to tell you this, but you didn’t make the team.” “I’m sorry, but you failed the class.” “I’m sorry, I just don’t want to be with you anymore.” “I’m so sorry, Mom and Dad, I’ve been arrested.” “I hate to tell you this, but you’re just not working out for us, and we have to let you go.” “I’m sorry, I want a divorce.” “I’m sorry, there is nothing more we can do for your mother.”

Hard words. How do we deal with them? For Christians, the ultimate way is through the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus also called the Holy Spirit “the Comforter” and “the Counselor,” the One who would give us the peace that passes understanding, or make us wise when we most needed wisdom. One important thing we all need to learn as Christians is the difference between the Holy Spirit and the “spirit of the times,” which is also called the *zeitgeist*. The *zeitgeist*, the spirit of the times, is driven by the culture, whatever the culture is at any given time. Sometimes the

culture is healthy and sometimes it is toxic, but it's always changing and sometimes it's as unstable as quicksand. Getting stuck in quicksand will make you really appreciate a rock. And while Christians should always be mindful of the signs of the times—being clueless is not a virtue—any church that relies upon the prevailing culture to decide what its identity is will be forever feverishly trying to catch the last great wave. A culture-driven church is neither traditional nor far-seeing; it is simply, perpetually, unfashionable. A church is healthiest when it is manifesting what scripture calls “the fruits of the Holy Spirit”—“...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things” [Galatians 5.22-23]. So what is the opposite of the fruits of the Spirit? Hatred, discouragement, conflict, impetuosity, animosity, selfishness, infidelity, rudeness, and promiscuity. If you look at what's happening in the world, or in our country today, there's not a whole lot of evidence that the fruits of the Holy Spirit are abounding. But the fruits of the *zeitgeist*, the spirit of the age? At the moment, they seem to be flourishing. That's why Christians have to follow Christ, and not the world, not only for our sakes, but for the world's sake as well.

Those of us who are parents, or grandparents, spend a significant bit of our emotional energy trying to reduce the number of choices our children make that we know they will regret. The reason we know they will regret those choices is because we made a lot of them ourselves, and we want

them to be healthier, smarter, happier and wiser than we were. We want our children to dream their dreams, to have their “I Wish” songs, but we want those wishes to be life-enhancing, and not soul-destroying. If we’re parents, we’re only as happy as our unhappiest child. If our children are OK, we’ll be OK, and so will the world.

In Cormac McCarthy’s Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Road*, there has been an apocalyptic disaster, and the country has been turned into a wasteland. A father and his young son strive to walk to the Gulf of Mexico, hundreds of miles away, and all their journey they are close to starving, threatened by cannibals, and confronting unspeakable cruelty. All they possess is what is in their backpacks and a grocery cart, including a pistol with two bullets. On their long, wretched walk, the father fights desperately to protect his son from harm. Whenever the idealistic young son becomes disheartened, or disconsolate, or wonders about his father’s tactics, his father tells him they have to keep pushing on, whatever befalls, because they are the good guys and they are “carrying the fire.” The son doesn’t understand what “carrying the fire” means. It isn’t until the end, when the father dies protecting his son, and the son is taken in by another family who are also “good guys,” that he comes to realize that the fire his father was carrying was him.

You, our children, are the fire of our lives. You are the torchlight we shine upon the future. You will shine most brightly when the light of Christ shines through you. Amen.