

“In the Midst of Your Challenges, God is with You” based on John 14:23-29
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on May 25, 2025, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

Today is Graduate Sunday, and in a few minutes, we will hear from our graduates. This is a beautiful tradition in which our graduates talk about this church community and what it has meant to them to be a member of this congregation. We will all enjoy their words and for some, it will stir up memories, as they remember when these three were little. For others, seeing these young people and who they are will instill hope for the kids who will follow them.

Now, these three are about to embark on new journeys, and soon we will say goodbye – for now. They will go from us to communities in Boone, NC, in Sewanee, TN, and in Slovakia. They are bravely going to enter these new spaces, in which they will learn and grow.

Yet, it is in these places that they will become ministers. I don’t mean this in the sense that they will be pastors or even that they are missionaries. No, I mean this in the sense that these three who have received love here, and they will have opportunities to share this love with others. More than anything they learn or accomplish, most valuable will be how they persevere. This will be seen in how they rejoice with those who rejoice and how they mourn with those who mourn.

Parents, grandparents, family, friends, and fellow church members – we will be tempted. Yes, we will be tempted to think, “All I really want for them is to be happy.” The modern world tells us that this is our highest end – to be happy. The pursuit of happiness tells us that we must find ourselves, and be the most authentic version of our “self” and perform it. We perform so that it is recognized by others, even celebrated. In this, we all become like a gambler at a casino, who says to herself, “When I win this one, then I will be happy and stop gambling.” But there is always more to win. There is always a new gamble to make.

Trey, Anna, and Charlie – you already are your most authentic self, because you are you. You are a human being made in the image of God, loved by God just the way you are. There is no accomplishment or performance that will make you more you. There is no accomplishment or performance that will make God love you. There is no accomplishment or performance that brings lasting happiness. However, there is a divine peace – a wholeness and rest – that comes with accepting this love and sharing it with others.

As Jesus tells his disciples of his impending sorrow – his imminent death on the cross. He does not give them happiness. He does not give them something to distract them from this reality they face. Jesus gives them peace – “Peace, I leave with you. My peace, I give to you.” This is not the type of peace the world promises – whether that idea of peace is the absence of conflict or plenty of distractions of happiness. No, this peace is from the Holy Spirit, the comforter, who is our advocate who calls out to us and for us to teach us and remind us of what Jesus said.

As talented and amazing as you are, you will face many trials and even pain in your life. To tell you otherwise, is to lie to you. As the man in black, Westley once said, “Life is pain. Anyone who says differently is selling something.” Now, I don’t know if you’ve seen the Princess Bride, and if you haven’t there is a parental failure we need to fix, but he has a point. You will be bombarded in your life and probably already have been by wellness gurus and influencers on social media and everywhere else, along with brand pushers telling you to be your own brand. They tell you that life

can be pain free if you buy their product or do their regiment. They will tell you that you can live your best life. Some will sell you Jesus in this way. The largest church in America is a place where all the pastor does is talk about living your best life. There are billboards in our own city that say this. But we don't buy Jesus or use Jesus for a better life.

No, in this reading Jesus knows he will soon be betrayed and hanged upon a cross. Yet, he does not lie. He says instead that in every aspect of life, peace is what he offers with a promise, that in good times and bad, sickness and health, God will be with you. In everything – every single part of your life – God will be with you.

And to all of us, as a church, our role is to likewise be with you in some way. This at least means praying for you. My prayer for you is that we have done our job to this point already, as we have been able to. Then it is that we will continue to do our job in this, as we are able to. Then where we fall short, we do a better job.

The promise of God is not conditional – something which you must earn or accomplish. God's love is not a bet like happiness, where each win makes you yearn for another. God's love is a sure thing, and the Holy Spirit pursues you always with this love.

Now, I know that at the start of our reading this morning, at the start it sounded like there was something conditional – an “if, then.” This is descriptive, however, and not prescriptive. This is not so because I say so, but Jesus says it. He states that the one who does not love him, does not keep his words. He does not say that this one is not loved by him, the Spirit, or the Father.

Plus we are in John's gospel, so I keep pushing us back to that central verse that tells us that everyone on this planet is loved by God, just as Jesus says in John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he sent his unique Son – the one and only, or only begotten – so that whoever believes in him will not perish, but will have eternal life,” or literally, the life of “the age to come.”

Know this – God loves you just the way you are, right now, but God loves you too much to just leave you as you are right now. You are made in the image of God and loved by God, who longs to transform you. If you love God in return, you will do as Jesus says. This means you will love others, just as he loves you and when you do this, it reveals a faith in you. God will create a room, a dwelling place for you, with him always.

This is why I said at the start that in the places where you go, you will become ministers. The love you have received – from those around you who choose each day to love you – is the love you have to share. Just as God who does not need you or need to love you, but chooses to love you, and even became a human being just like you, in order to live as you live, revealing how to live a life of love, even going to his death on the cross for you, to rise for you.

Even if we, your church, your family, your friends, and even your parents have failed in this, The God who made all things has not failed, and in Jesus we see what love is. He forgave sinners. He healed the sick. He fed the hungry. He served the lowly, and when the world's powers could not tolerate it anymore, Jesus received the rejection of a friend, of his own people, and endured the worst that Rome had to offer. He endured the shameful death of crucifixion. He was whipped and beaten, nailed to a cross, and hanged naked to die for all to see.

The irony though is that this punishment was meant to silence him and destroy him. Yet there is no one in this world more famous than Jesus. That moment is why the whole world now is able to hear his message. He did not endure this because God somehow needed all of this to happen. No, it was because when God bore our flesh and entered this world, that sin and death tried to put an end to God, who is love. But God knew this would happen, and God showed us that love wins.

Trey, Anna, and Charlie – you have already persevered through much, and accomplished much. but your identity is not in your accomplishments. You are much more than that. You are much more than your talents, your relationships, or the families you come from. You are more than what you have done and more than what you will do.

Trey, you have your own business, but you are more than that. Anna, you created the Community Fridge ministry here, but you are much more than that also. Charlie, you are a superb tennis player, but you are much more than this too. These and so much more are just ways to describe you, but they are not your identity. If tomorrow, you decide to shut down your business Trey, you are still Trey. If tomorrow, the Community Fridge is gone, Anna, you are still Anna. If tomorrow, you retire from tennis, Charlie, you are still Charlie.

These or any other accomplishments are not who you are. They only attempt to describe the person you have been to this point. Your true identity is that you are a child of God, a sibling of the Lord in Jesus Christ, by whose life, death, resurrection and ascension, you have been adopted in God's family, and given the inheritance of God – an abundant and eternal life. The downpayment on this inheritance is the Holy Spirit given to you, and given to the church, to dwell in and among us and by our side. This Spirit is with you, it is with all of us, in life's challenges. It pours the love of God in us, and this love flows, in greater and greater amounts, when it flows from us and out to others. This love is our superpower too and it gives life.

You are children of God right now, exactly as you are and loved for exactly who you are. You do not need to accomplish something to show the world who you really are. You do not need to let yourselves be worn out by trying constantly to prove and “be yourself.” God the creator of all things, knows you by name, and you do not need to perform for God as you do the world. God is not looking at your social media to see you signal virtue. God does not need you to enforce rules against all the other sinners.

No, God sees you right now for the sinner that you are. We sin because we are always prone to seek the world's love, instead of trusting God. But Jesus says to you, “Peace, I leave with you. My peace, I give to you.” When the road is hard and you face the sadness of goodbye, and loss, God is near to you in the Holy Spirit, to be a minister to you and comfort you. This is because what the world says cannot be God – a crucified Jesus – in instead, the fullness of God as a minister to us in our flesh.

Let the knowledge of God's love for you and the Spirit. Open your eyes from within life's pain and trials, to our God who finds the lost, heals the broken, and redeems all of us, by suffering with and for all of us. Again, Love wins.

Soon, we will say to each of you, “Goodbye,” as you head north to Boone, North Carolina, and west to Sewanee, Tennessee, and east to Slovakia, but it is not just a farewell. We are not selling something and so we should not lie and say, “fare well.” We should say goodbye in the way the first

English speakers said it “god bye” or “with God,” meaning “God with God.” Or we can look to other languages with “Adios” or “Adieu” points, which mean “to God” in the sense of, “Go to God.”

Wherever we go, God goes before us, and we must always remember we go to God. We go with the Holy Spirit, and in the knowledge of God’s love, may we obey Jesus – love one another as I have loved you. Let us use the superpower he has revealed for us – the superpower of love.

Rest in this love, for you do not have to earn it, or accomplish anything. Be transformed by this love, and let it make you more like Jesus. The Spirit is with you to teach you and remind you of his love, and his peace is with you, to make you whole, even as the world tries to tear you apart. And finally, be active in this love. For just as God has ministered to you, and just as your family, friends and church have too, may you minister in every space to every person you meet, and in every place through every relationship you make. For all of these, God has placed your path. Amen.