**1 Corinthians 13:4-8 June 19, 2021 (JoAnn Carlson Funeral)**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ but especially to you the family and friends of JoAnn Carlson,

It is a somber day, and yet a day of celebration. We are gathered to mourn, and yet we sing songs that extol and rejoice the name of our Lord and how good He is to us, as we sang in “Rock of Ages” and later as we sing about the “Amazing Grace” of the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Even in our own lives we know that it’s the middle of June, it’s a Saturday in the Summer when people from other parts of the state travel to our area to have fun on the lake, to enjoy a day full of fishing, swimming, good food, and lots of fun outdoors, and yet today it’s looking like rain and thunderstorms. We live in this happy, yet sad, yet happy mentality in our lives, and a day like today in your lives, as you gather together to say goodbye to JoAnn is no different. This is a somber service, and yet as it says in your bulletin it is a service of celebration. We are here to celebrate, not the fact that JoAnn is no longer with us, no that’s what brings the sadness, that’s the reality of sin, separation, death is separation and since all have sinned all will die. That stares us right in the face on a day like today, when we gather together in a place like this, and later as we go to lay JoAnn’s remains to rest in her burial. But we are still here to celebrate together, as family and friends, as acquaintances and members of her church and therefore her family as brothers and sisters in Christ. We are here to celebrate the truth of our Epistle reading, a very simple truth that we hear at different points in people’s lives, perhaps at a Baptism talking about the relationship that children have with their parents, speaking about a connection that goes beyond a sense of obligation but gets to the true care that we are shown by God our Heavenly Father. We hear this particular section of Scripture most often at weddings, where two people are being joined together in a lifelong bond and it speaks about how their relationship is a reflection of God and His Bride the church. But here, in a rather unique way, we look at these words from 1 Corinthians chapter 13, at the end of JoAnn’s journey in this world, and we reflect on how profound it is, that when we talk about love, we’re focusing on the love that God has for us, and how ultimately, what we can celebrate on a day like today, gathered together in mutual support, is this simple truth: Love never ends.

Life ends. It will for all of us, there’s no denying it, running from it, hiding from it, there’s just no getting away from it. We live in a finite and decaying world and our own bodies are the same ever since the Fall into Sin so long ago. So many things in our lives end, sometimes it’s for the best, other times we wish to hold on to them just a while longer. Look back on JoAnn’s life. Her time at Austin High School in Chicago ended, and she moved on, attending college for two years. Her marriage to Darwin was blessed for many years, but sadly it still came to an end in 2014. Her time as a secretary was blessed, and yet it came to an end. No employment lasts forever. Things come to an end. Hobbies and other things we enjoy, our interests they change, we can’t just keep doing the same things forever and ever. And yet, the love of God isn’t like the things of this world. It isn’t finite. It isn’t quantified you can’t put a number on it or get a sense of it running out or being higher than other people’s. We don’t need to worry today that JoAnn wasn’t loved by God enough to go to her eternal rest based upon anything that she had to do or didn’t accomplish or give that’s not how God’s love works. God’s love is the free gift of salvation given by His Son Jesus Christ and His sacrifice on the cross and His resurrection that declares us free from the penalty of sin which is eternal death. And as He died, we died to sin through Him. And as He rose, we too will rise again. Death is an ending, an ending of the journey of life here on Earth, but death is not Thee end. It is not the final end, it does not have the final say. Death is swallowed up in the victory of our Savior Jesus Christ, whose love for us never ends. There is no ending to life due to His life and his love, a love so foreign and alien to us that we can’t possibly fully understand it until we go to be with Him for all eternity, which is what JoAnn is experiencing now. She has not ended. She is not gone forever, she has not ceased to be. She is with the Lord and knowing a love that never ends.

The challenge for you today isn’t to lift the needs of JoAnn to the Lord and pray for her, that work is accomplished. She has been blessed with exactly what Simeon prays for in our Gospel reading from Luke chapter 2, “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace.” She has departed in peace. She needs nothing more from us in the form of prayer, worry, or help. The challenge for you today, is exactly what we talked about at the beginning of this service of celebration, and it’s really explained beautifully in the hymn that was chosen for the beginning of our service this morning. “The Old Rugged Cross” is a favorite hymn that I’ve heard sung at many funerals, especially in this area but also at my former parish in Palmer, Kansas. And here is the dilemma, or the tension, or a better way to think of it here is the paradoxical nature of looking at the wonderful cross in our lives as Lutherans and Christians, in our lives and journeys of faith. We sang it in the very first verse, “On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross, the emblem of suffering and shame.” Now why would we focus on an emblem of suffering and shame on a day like today where we are celebrating the life that JoAnn now has with Jesus Christ? Why would we put crosses so prominently in our places of worship or even wear them around our necks? Why is Trinity Lutheran Church in Onekama, JoAnn’s home congregation, putting so much work and money into replacing the big lit up cross that extends out over Portage Lake in our community? If it’s an emblem of suffering and shame why do we focus on it so often? Well in the same way, when you think of JoAnn, what is the point if it’s only going to bring you sadness and suffering, to mourn without hope and in the despair that she is no longer around or you are not able to pick up the phone and call her or message her and have her respond? There’s no hope or comfort in those sorts of memories, just as there is no hope or comfort if all you see of the cross is the suffering of Jesus Christ your Savior and the shame that your sin put him on that cross and led to his death.

But the beauty of the cross is found in the death of Jesus, because if it wasn’t for his death on the cross, we would die eternally. Verse 3, “In the old rugged cross, stained with blood so divine, a wonderous beauty I see; for twas on that old cross Jesus suffered and died, to pardon and sanctify me.” There is beauty in even the most sad things in the world. There is beauty in the knowledge that Jesus died on that cross to save us. There is beauty in the fact that JoAnn isn’t here, because she’s somewhere better, some place beyond our understanding, a place where God’s love for her never ends and where she gets to experience it forever.

I had very few interactions with JoAnn, I won’t pretend to have known her closely or to have shared many conversations together. But the time I did hear from her, a few months ago, when she was sharing her health struggles and we were able to converse a bit she said something, that gives me peace on a day like today as her pastor. She said, “I miss church.” My dear friends in Christ, her wish has been granted, she is now part of the greatest congregation and in the greatest church, experiencing the very thing she wasn’t able to. May that bring you comfort and joy, even on a day of mourning and sadness.

Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.