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Beth, Carolyn, Pastor Jill and I were going through Lila's Funeral Arrangements last week,

and Beth and Carolyn pointed out a section on Lila's funeral planning document

that prompted the following question,

'If you could give your loved ones anything, it would be....'

And here are Lila's words, written in her own hand, answering that question.

"To go forward," Lila wrote,

"Facing the future and its challenges in God's strength.

To cultivate thankfulness.

To live lives of joy, in the assurance of God's love and guidance for them in their lives and in their futures."

And then Lila listed 1 Peter, chapter 4, verse 8, which says this:

'Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins.'

'Maintain constant love,' wrote Lila.

She wrote that to, and for, you.

And Lila must have known enough about God's love in the world,

and how hard it can be to live this life with love,

to use that word, '**maintain.**'

To maintain constant love. That's not easy.

Pastor Jill and I were honored to sit and pray with Lila over these last years.

I met her over two years ago for the first time.

And each time I was with Lila, I felt the joyful maintenance of God's love emanate from her, in wave after wave.

Love, joy, gratitude. It was always on tap with Lila, right Pastor Jill?

And it seems to me that Lila's final, written words about this love—

if we Christian leaders would humble ourselves to allow Lila's clear call for love to lead our churches—

her words would, indeed, be the guide that might revitalize our ministries.

Lila's words, the words she most wanted to give to you—

her beloved family,

passed on to you ,and to us,

—are so central,

because Lila knew if love is not our first evangelistic and pastoral orientation,

there will be no joy, there will be no strength, there will be no thankfulness, no assurance, and no Christ-like guidance from the church,

nor will there be any of those things in our lives, without love.

Now, let's talk about that line from John's Gospel today, when Thomas says,

"Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

Thomas speaks for many of you today, doesn't he?

I know Thomas speaks for me.

I don't know the way, either. Not in this world, oh no.

Not in a world where our little ones are in danger in their schools, and violence rages in Haiti and Ethiopia and Ukraine.

Not in a world where it keeps getting hotter and more and more refugees flee the climate, and the corruption, and the violence, and the food crises.

Not in a world where people grow more and more suspicious of one another, forming up into separate factions to demean and deny one another's fundamental humanity.

So preach on, brother Thomas, I say: because we don't know the way, either.

But then I recall Lila's spirit into my heart, and what God's love gave her.

And I imagine Lila's service in the name of such a love.

I imagine the higher power of God's grace that was Lila's true sustenance.

Jesus responds to Thomas,
in a way I believe Lila's spirit would respond
to our troubled hearts.

In a way Lila's spirit would respond to our suffering:

Jesus says to Thomas,

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life, Thomas. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Well, Amen, I know I can't come to God except through the courageous maintenance of Jesus' love for us and for the world.

But too, too many Christians use this verse as a weapon against other people who may believe different things about God,
and I think they miss the point of God's love, entirely.

I wonder if Lila would say, 'Look, my beloved family. Look here, my beloved friends.

'If it isn't about love, **it's not coming from God.**'

Will you say, 'Amen' to that?

Like all of us, in these desperate days, Thomas was suffering.

Thomas was anxious. Thomas was afraid.

And we all know, fear makes us say and do terrible, terrible things to one another.

And yet Jesus responded to Thomas' fear not by saying,

'Well, Thomas, I know you're afraid, but: I'm the only way. I'm the only truth. I'm the only life.

You better believe in me because I'm going to send you to hell if you don't.'

Why would Jesus say something like that to a person in pain?

No. No. I believe Jesus is saying, instead:

'Thomas, in your suffering, Thomas, in your anxiety, Thomas, in your fear, the only way to maintain love in times like these

is to trust in my way of grace,

To trust in my way of loving one's enemies,
To trust in my way of feeding the poor,
And welcoming the stranger and the outcast,

Trust in my way of making wine out of water,
....because I love a good party.

Trust in my way of lifting up the little children,
Trust in my way of throwing over the tables of greed and
empire,
Trust in my way of healing people so they could also become
healers in my name,
Trust in my way of calling out injustice like the prophets who
came before me,
Trust in my way of bringing all kinds of different people
together,
Trust in my way of suffering love, and forgiveness, and
peacemaking,
and dare to trust in my way of death and resurrection,
for that is the ultimate sign of stubborn hope and grace in this
fearful, angry, violent world.'

Lila trusted in the maintenance of that loving way, that loving
truth, that loving life, Amen?

Jesus'. Maintenance. of. Love.

Not the maintenance of exclusion, or the maintenance of
judgment.

Lila showed us this love, through her allegiance and devotion to
her Lord and liberator, Jesus Christ.

You are so loved, all of you here, whether you believe in Jesus'
way, Jesus Truth, or Jesus' Life, or not.

Lila made it crystal clear in her final, written words: that's exactly what I'm supposed to proclaim to you right now.

Lila wanted you to know
there was a stubborn sacrifice
made by this one person,
at a very dark time in world history,
in the face of such greed,
in the face of such violence,
and in the face of such exclusion, and judgement, and despair.

And I believe, just as Lila believed, that this one person's
stubborn sacrifice of grace was. a. message.

It was a message of stubborn grace, and stubborn forgiveness,
and stubborn love for all people, even for those who put Jesus
on that cross.

I mean, you had to have a stubborn belief in a higher power, to
start out and survive on the farm like Lila did, Amen?

Lila knew about stubborn animals, and stubborn cold, and
stubborn mud, and stubborn darkness.

But for her, it appears the Gospel of God's maintaining love was
even more stubborn, as a light, to guide her way through this
life.

And her most fervent wish for all of you,
Lila's stubborn light, for all of us, with these, her final words,
her final chance to gift you with something,
was to implore you to embrace the higher power of God's love
for yourselves.

"To go forward," wrote Lila.

'Facing the future and its challenges

in God's strength.

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'Above all,

maintain constant love for one another,

for love covers a multitude of sins.'

Amen.