Because I live, Jesus said, you also will live.

That’s the line that jumped out of this text for this Sunday when our pastoral residents read this. Here’s a little Wilshire insider tidbit for you: since our residents are going to have to plan their own sermons for weeks ahead when they are pastors themselves, I gave them the practice assignment of planning the next few months and promised I would preach their plan. Go ahead, tell me how brave I am. So, this is the title they gave me and here we go ... 

What does Jesus mean when he says this? We should go first to what he meant and then ask what he means. In the context of this passage, Jesus is talking to his disciples about his impending death. This is part of Jesus’ Farewell Discourses in chapters 14-17. He is preparing his friends for what is to come. He has washed their feet and shared a meal in the Upper Room where he gave them the Maundy Thursday new commandment to “love one another as I have loved you.” Then he promises he is going to prepare a place for them in his Father’s house, where there are many rooms. He assures them that since he is “the way, the truth and the life,” they should have no fear because he will come and bring them to the Father and they will be safe in that house with all the refreshment needed for the in-between time that comes after they die and before the final resurrection.

It’s kind of like being in quarantine with the family of God until the great reopening of all things and the new normal. Interesting parallel, don’t you know?!

In the meantime, Jesus wants to assure them that even though he is leaving them, they will not be orphans. It’s a curious phrase, but it wasn’t unusual in that day to think of a teacher and his disciples as a spiritual family.

There is a fast-growing number of COVID-19 orphans in our world today. We are nearing 300,000 deaths worldwide and will soon hit 100,000 in the
United States. Some children are literal orphans. But there’s a metaphorical sense, too. Some of you have thought of your church as your family. Maybe we are all the family you have left and you feel cut off and orphaned emotionally. Some of you have felt orphaned from the life you knew in other ways. You have been orphaned from your workplaces and colleagues, and maybe from the job you once held that is no longer there. I am thinking also about our high school graduates, whom we recognized today. You have lost the normal connection to your friends and teachers, no matter how they tried to compensate. You will miss out on the wonderful baccalaureate and commencement speakers—okay, the graduation parties.

The language of being orphaned is full of meanings. Again, what did Jesus mean when he said that he would not leave his disciples orphaned, but that they would live because he lives? Well, he didn’t mean they would never die. He meant something more about the life he promised than just living physically.

The Greek has two words for life: bios and zoe. Bios is biological life. It’s life at the most basic chemical level. If we are breathing, we have biological life. But a more comprehensive understanding of life is zoe. This is life in its fullest dimensions. It’s about relationships. It’s about being connected to God and to others. It’s about a quality of life that is more than the quantity of days. The word Jesus uses here is zoe. This is the abundant life he promised his disciples they would have. They would never be cut off from the family of God.

When Jesus rose from the dead, God vindicated his life as being rooted in eternal love—a love that is stronger than death, a love that survives the grave. As long as they would live biologically, they would live spiritually. And when they no longer lived biologically, they would continue to live spiritually.

I had a beautiful exchange this week with John Gillis. He gave me permission to share this with you. Many of you know that he lost his beloved wife Carolyn in a tragic auto accident in Belize last fall. Carolyn was full of life—the zoe kind of life. She was connected to everyone, and she nurtured all her relationships in such a rich way that her death
was especially painful for all of us—none more so than her husband John. So, when the time came for us to celebrate Holy Communion during Holy Week on that very night Jesus gave us the new commandment to love one another, John imagined Carolyn sharing that meal with him from the heavenly place Jesus had promised. Afterward, he felt a bit uneasy: he was worried about whether it was orthodox for him to do so; whether it was just his grief talking and not good theology. I assured him that their lives were bound up together in Christ and that the Spirit Jesus had given them kept them bound together even in death. *Because I live, you also will live.*

This is the move we make when we read a text like this. As the late Baptist theologian James McClendon put it: “This is that. Then is now.” The point being that we exist together as the church today in a continuous and unbroken line with the church back then. So, when Jesus addresses his disciples then, he is addressing us as his disciples now. *Because he lives, we will live.*

But how do we experience his life in ours now? At the beginning of this passage and at the end—almost like bookends to his promise—he tells us that if we love him, we will keep his commandments.

We often think of commandments as a heavy list of moral duties for us to perform. We only do them because we are commanded to. We certainly wouldn’t want to have to forfeit our own autonomy and obey another’s authority if we didn’t have to. But if you consider again that the new commandment Jesus gave us was to love one another as he has loved us, this changes everything. It means we are being invited to share in his life of love. A life of love that is never ending. A life of love that he describes by the phrase: I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. This is a circle of love in the family of God where no one is left alone, no one is orphaned.

When we keep his commandment to love one another, we experience that love and feel the connection of a zoe-kind of life in the here and now. In the doing of his commandments, we see him when and where others don’t. The living Christ comes into view for us when we love one another.
When someone close and beloved to us dies and we are grieving—and I’m sure John Gillis can testify to this—we tend to keep as many of the routines we shared together in our love, at least initially. And each time we do, we feel the living presence of our departed loved one. We sense that we are still bound together in this relationship that links heaven and earth.

Our church is working hard to stay connected in love to one another during this quarantine period. Every phone call and card and text renews the bond. It keeps us together in love.

But it’s harder to love those who are different from us, isn’t it? For instance, I have a hard time loving gun-toting protestors at state capitals across the country who are claiming their liberty to put others in danger by defying the social distancing guidelines. Who are you having trouble loving right now?

Cornel West makes a powerful distinction about the public and private dimensions of love. *Tenderness is what love feels like in private,* he says. *Justice is what love looks like in public."

We tend to focus on the private tenderness of love, but I have seen something beautiful in Wilshire’s growing advocacy for racial justice. I was on a Zoom call last Monday with the Reverend Doctor Michael Waters of—get this—Abundant Life AME Church in South Dallas. He has become a friend and colleague over the past few years. He is a powerful civil rights activist. The bond that has developed over our standing together in public and speaking from our pulpits and podiums around town for racial justice is a sign of hope and healing.

In the wake of the murder of Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia on February 23 by white vigilantes, it isn’t enough for black Americans to cry out for justice one more time. Love demands that white Christians do the same. We can’t just shake our heads in private and say what a shame it all is that this keeps happening. We must speak up and condemn racism and white supremacy. We must repent of our mistaken belief that black people are inherently violent and lawless and a threat to us. And when we do, when we love in public like that, let me tell you what happens: black Christians,
who have so long felt separated from white Christians to such an extent that they wonder if they—or we!—are orphaned from Christ himself, are astonished and grateful. They’ve been waiting for us. We aren’t white saviors by any means. We all have one and only one Savior. We are simply brothers and sisters finally obeying the commandment of Jesus to love one another. When we do, we and they are able to see that Christ is in fact alive and is loose in the world even now.

Let’s stay at it, Wilshire—privately AND publicly. Because he lives, we will live. Amen.