

The lasts

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My daughter is a senior in high school. Now that she's officially got herself into college (Vassar) and she, her father, her brother, and I know that she'll be going away, we've begun the parade of lasts—her last home high school swim meet, her last YMCA state swim meet, her last biggest/shortest concert (a concert that involves all of the strings students in the Waterville school system), etc.

The rest of the school year leading up to graduation will be full of lasts, some more significant than others. But there will be plenty of them.

I've been thinking a lot about lasts. During a recent clergy breakfast, a colleague was wondering about lasts in relationship to the church that she serves. Is this the last few months that she will be with them? Is this the last year that they will be able to exist as a church?

At Old South, the church I serve, I've been thinking about lasts, too. Although our situation is not nearly as dire as my colleague's, I do wonder, as we celebrate our 225th anniversary, if the church will be around for the next big anniversary. Does the church have another 25 years or is this our last milestone?

Churches have a hard time with lasts, and that is understandable. Especially for those of us who have some memory of full church sanctuaries, it is difficult to accept that our circumstances have changed so dramatically in a relatively short period of time, on our watch, so to speak. Talking to church members whose churches have closed, I am taken aback by the language of failure, with good church people talking about closure with words like, "Our church failed."

But, as I think about my daughter's lasts, many of which are bittersweet, I'm also increasingly aware of the life that is a part of them, that she is living a life that, though connected to me, is not controlled or engineered by me. (Even if I wish it to be!) The lasts that she is experiencing, in and of themselves, don't express success or failure; they are part of her journey of life. They reflect choices that, though selected by her parents initially (when she was nine, she didn't sign up for the swim team herself, after all), are now hers. Even as her parent, I'm not so much in control of the path and the journey of her life, as I am a participant, a loving guide, an encouraging presence. The life that she is living is hers, connected yet also significantly separate, moving in its own direction.

I've been thinking about this dynamic in relation to my connection to church. I am less in control of where and how the path of the church will unfold, and where it will end. My role is not so much to control, as to participate, love, and encourage. My place is to be a part of a good church, a church that demonstrates and lives out God's love and hope, even if that means that we are in our own series of lasts.

Even if Old South does not manage to make it to its 250th, I'd like to think that we will never think of our church as a failure. Instead, we will think of our good witness, and our efforts to live out the love, hope, peace, and joy of God through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. If we remain true to the gospel, we and the church of which we are part will never be a failure. Even if we come to a place where we close our doors and shut down.

Who knows what life may come next? It may be better and more exciting than we can imagine.

To believe is to trust and to trust is to know that God lives, and God lives in our midst, even if we are—consciously or unconsciously—living out a series of lasts. All I or we can do is to share the love of God with reckless abandon. We may not attract others, or enough others, to keep this church called Old South running into the indefinite future. But we are still church and our witness still matters.

As I am discovering with my daughter, some lasts are happy, some are sad, and some are both. But they are not bad and they certainly are not failures. They are part of the journey of life. They are part of the journey of faith.

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