“I say to you who are listening, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” The day before he was killed, I asked Ralph before church if he had any prayer requests. He looked at me and asked that we pray for Deron. He asked that we pray for the man who would kill him the very next day. A man who Ralph had struggled to help and love for four years—opening up his home, wallet, and life to him. A man who had once shoved him down in anger and left him there helpless. A man who had stolen his car. A man who had threatened to kill him and many of us on numerous occasions. Yes, this man, Ralph wanted to pray for, because that’s what Jesus commands. Ralph took Jesus’s teachings seriously, not as old and irrelevant words, but as something to always obey and commit your life to. And Jesus taught Ralph to never give up hope that Deron is redeemable, that at his core, despite all the darkness and poor choices, Deron is God’s creature, who needs love and help, just like the rest of us.

Ralph is what a martyr looks like. Martyr is a Greek word that means “witness.” A martyr is a witness who points others to the Truth—to Jesus. A martyr is not perfect and do not be fooled into thinking Ralph was perfect. He was flawed, he had serious failures and sins in his life, just like the rest of us. But Ralph did not give up and quit because he had sins and failures. He kept striving to repent and obey and to point us to something—to someone—beyond himself—to Jesus.

Ralph ran the difficult race of being a martyr, a witness whose life is pointing to Jesus. Ralph was knocked down hard by life many times, but he endured and persevered. This was most obvious in how he responded to his stroke which paralyzed part of his body. Ralph could have easily given himself over to a comfortable, sedentary life of retirement focused on his own pleasure and ease. But Ralph chose to focus on something else. And so he kept working and exercising, he kept walking when he could have easily quit. He kept going even when it was hard and the pain was intense. And he did all this, so he could keep following and obeying Jesus. Every time he forced himself to get up and shuffle to his car, day after day, so he could come to church, to Bible study, to Faith & Film, to council meetings, to a homeless breakfast, he was pursuing and seeking Jesus through it all. He did this even if it meant riding his lawnmower to events because his car had been stolen. Every time he was relentlessly generous and loving toward others—and so many of you have countless stories of that generosity you could share—he was pursuing and seeking Jesus. Deron did not take Ralph’s life, Ralph chose to freely lay down his life in loving imitation of Jesus.

Even when he struggled to do so, Ralph kept trying to love others as he would want to be loved. He kept trying to forgive others in the way he would want to be forgiven. He tried to have patience with others in the way he wanted others to have patience with him. He pursued all this because Jesus taught him to, Jesus who says, **“If you forgive others, then your heavenly Father will forgive you.”** And when Ralph showed endless forgiveness and love to Deron, the one who killed him, he was following Jesus, the one who turned the other cheek, the one who loved and forgave his enemies, the one who sacrificed himself for all creation, the one who laid down his life willingly for us who do not deserve it, the one who was not afraid of death. Ralph knew that Jesus calls each of us and says, **“You must take up your cross and follow me.”** Ralph willingly took up that cross and followed—and seeing his witness, hopefully we will do the same and be loving and forgiving to even the most unlovable.

We are all gathered here today because we witnessed something and saw something beautiful in Ralph that drew us to him. And Ralph has left all of us something far more precious and important than the wealth of any earthly and worldly inheritance—he has left us the witness of his life—a heavenly treasure that he stored up during his life. So take some time during your pain and grief to pay attention and marvel at what Ralph was pointing you towards—he was not pointing you to the wealth and power of this world, he was not pointing you to himself, he was pointing you to Jesus. Jesus who loves you in a radical way that is beyond description and measure, even when you have been heartless, selfish, and cruel. Jesus who keeps giving and forgiving you even when you are entitled and oblivious. Jesus who loves you so much that he lays down his life for you even if you ignore him and kill him.

And this love of Jesus is what we all need in our lives and in our world. This world does not need politicians and political parties and elections and culture wars, it needs love, God’s love for you and me and all his creation in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, the one who was spit on, betrayed, and murdered by those he loved. The one who defeated death by freely giving himself over to death.

Our world needs more martyrs, more witnesses who point us to this radical love of Jesus. Being a martyr is certainly not “safe” or “responsible” or “practical” or “easy,” but it is the highest good. So reassess your life and look at Jesus who Ralph is pointing you towards. Then do your part to strive after Jesus’s Way of love. Despite all your weaknesses and frailties, you too can be a martyr and witness to love. Do not let despair creep into your heart. Do not let hate and a desire for revenge swallow your soul. Do not let your love grow cold because of the great tragedies and evil in this world. Do not quit. Do not give up. Keep taking one step after another, even if you have to shuffle. Keep going. Keep loving. Focus on Jesus and follow his Way as he says to you, “**Love your enemies, do good, and give, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for God himself is kind to ungrateful and evil people. Be merciful, just as your heavenly Father is merciful.”** Jesus laid down his life for you. And Jesus empowered Ralph to lay down his life. And now Jesus is challenging you to go forth this day and lay down your life in love for those around you, even for your enemies. **Amen.**