The Funeral of Royce Wilken – February 21, 2025 Pastor Chris Repp
John 14:1-6 Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Lois, Tyler, Zach, family and friends of Royce Wilken, sisters and brothers in Christ: grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

I had the privilege of knowing Royce for a little over nine years, and had a lot of contact with him in that time. He was a fixture here at Grace, and one of a very few who could claim lifelong membership. But there was a lot I didn't know about him, because he was not one to talk a lot about himself. For instance, it was only a year ago around Thanksgiving that I learned that he had a private pilot license, although he didn't fly any more. So I strongly suspect that there were a lot of other things to discover about Royce if we had been given more years. But there were some things that stood out about him in the years I knew him, and chief among those was that Royce Wilken was someone who took care of people. I first noticed that soon after we came to Champaign and were settling into our new house. Within a few months, Royce sent me a four-page list of local resources and tradespeople that he considered trustworthy, from a plumber, a roofer, a drywaller, and a general contractor, to who to turn to for tax preparation, tree removal, and even dental work. I consulted that list several times early on, always with good results. But Royce took care of me in other ways as well. As a recently retired corporate administrator he mentored me in the administration of Grace's staff, and was my go-to advisor for at least one complicated situation that arose. He also served for several years as the chair of our Mutual Ministry Committee, a support committee for me as the pastor. And last April, as he was dealing with the new reality of his devastating diagnosis, he took time to write me a very touching e-mail on the day before my father's funeral. But of course I was not the only one Royce took care of. He also took care of his neighbors in need. His main focus here at Grace in the years that I knew him was the Grace Food Pantry, for which he served on the board and was a constant presence on Thursday mornings. He made sure I knew what the pantry was all about, and very early in my time here he took me on a run to the Central Illinois Foodbank and gave me a tour as we picked up supplies for the week. I am confident that many have similar stories of how Royce cared for you and for others. That was the kind of person he was.

The other thing that stood out about Royce to me as his pastor was his quiet faith in Jesus Christ. I won't go into detail on that, but I am sure that Royce's faith was an important source of his care for others. Okay, one detail. On my first visit to him after his diagnosis, when I first brought him communion, he was noticeably touched. I'm not sure that he had ever seen a portable communion set before. At that point he wasn't communicating easily – that got surprisingly much better later – but he did say several times that day about receiving communion, "Oh, that's nice." The other thing he communicated that day was that he was not concerned about dying. Let's be clear, he wasn't happy about it, not at all. But he wasn't concerned about himself. What he was mainly concerned about was that you, Lois, would be taken care of. In spite of all that he was going through, his main concern was for others. And I can only see that as a reflection of his faith, his trust in God's promise in Jesus that he was taken care of and didn't need to worry about that.

It is that promise that is now our focus for these few minutes this afternoon, as we gather to mark Royce's passing with mixed emotions; with deep thanksgiving for the gift that he was to us and with grief at losing him, at the interruption of our connection with him. Because there is much to give thanks for, there is also much to grieve, not least that our time with him feels like it has been cut short.

In the midst of things that are difficult to understand and hard to accept we fall back on the faith that sustained Royce in this life, remembering the promise God made to him in Holy Baptism, and trusting that the risen Lord Jesus has indeed prepared a place for him. We commend him to God our creator and redeemer, confident that Royce who spent so much time and energy taking care of others is now himself being taken care of in the fullness of God's presence and in the joyous company of all the dearly departed in Christ.

May that faith also sustain us today, and in the weeks and years to come. May we be inspired like Royce to take care of each other and all of God's beloved, near and far, throughout the world God loves in Jesus Christ. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in the same Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.