I hope Clinton High School and Laurens Academy’s English and Drama Departments still teach and produce shows and musicals such as the classic, *West Side Story*. I hope most of us know the story but just in case it’s been awhile let me remind you that there’s a young couple: he’s Polish American and she’s just arrived in America from Puerto Rico – and that their own small worlds of ethnic loyalty and polarizing gang warfare: the Jets vs. the Sharks – threaten to keep them apart BUT something or SOMEONE beyond them – we call it LOVE – we call it GOD – draws them together.

I hope you can remember and still see it in your minds-eye that in a makeshift wedding Tony and Maria kneel and offer this prayer: “Make of our hands, one hand - make of our hearts, one heart - make of our vow, the last vow only death will part - day-after-day, one life. Now it begins – one hand, one heart, even death won’t part us now.”¹

Despite the polarization and harsh realities of their own small worlds Tony and Maria believe that because of the presence – because of the LOVE beyond them and yet within them - they believe there’s a place for them to be together. They sing, “Somewhere, there’s a place for us. Peace and quiet and open air – wait for us – somewhere. There’s a time for us. Someday they’ll be a time for us. Time together and time to spare, a time to learn, a time to care. Someday, somewhere, we’ll find a new way of living. We’ll find a way of forgiving,

¹ From Roger’s and Hammerstein’s, *West Side Story*.
somewhere…hold my hand and we’re halfway there. Just hold my hand and I’ll take you there. Somehow – someday – somewhere…”

But just as they’re trying to get away from the world of division and danger to a place where they could live in love – HER people gun HIM down. There on the playground – the place where ALL God’s children – red and yellow, black and white – are meant to play together and celebrate that WE are ALL precious in God’s sight - there on the playground in the dark of the night she holds his hand until the life drains away.

Maria’s first reaction is perhaps like yours and mine – to HURT someone else to feel better herself - she grabs the gun and threatens revenge. She shows us how quickly hate and prejudice and division can take root and grow in the human heart – in OUR hearts. She points the gun at EVERYONE – her people – his people – then finally at herself – she reminds us WE ARE ALL guilty, all capable – we are ALL of a divided heart.

Yet, in that one moment SHE is CHANGED – Maria realizes – and I pray you and I realize – that somehow – someday – somewhere HAS COME. IN CHRIST, the TIME IS NOW – THE PLACE IS HERE - HERE IN OUR HEARTS AND MINDS AND SPIRITS. It’s time for a new way of living – it’s time for forgiving each other and ourselves. Hatred and revenge – division and death – us vs. them – these are NOT THE WAY. Maria throws down the gun – she rejects the way of hatred and death and goes back to take his hand – demonstrating her marriage to LOVE – a force so strong and enduring that the ways of this world – not even death – can OVERCOME it.

In the wake of her witness to the POWER AND PRESENCE OF LOVE, the world – at least her little corner of the world is CHANGED. Sharks AND Jets gather around and

2 Ibid.
become Tony’s pallbearers. Then, one by one, they leave in all directions – back into their world of concrete and chain-link, their world of poverty and want, yet they leave as changed people – a new community far larger than any gang or ethnicity or nation – a community bound and strengthened by love. Are we such a community?

A few weeks ago our 2017 Confirmands stood before this congregation and placed their hands and their hearts into Christ’s hands and Christ’s heart – the same hands that were pierced by nails and heart drained of life-blood by competing parties and deep divisions in the faith and in the world – the same hands and heart that were so filled with love there was no room in them for revenge. Our Confirmands have just begun their adult journey of faith.

In our text this morning, I believe our Lord is speaking to all of us but especially our 2017 graduates - the young women and men who are embarking on the next leg of their journeys of faith. Our Lord says you and I will be called on to do GREAT WORKS – to offer the same kind of love and truth and justice that Jesus gave in his own life here on this earth. We will be joining us the journey of living and forgiving – now it begins ONE HAND, ONE HEART, ONE VOW, NOT EVEN DEATH CAN PART US NOW.

A few months before we moved to Hartsville, we had a HUGE SNOW Storm in Clinton – the storm began early one Monday morning and persisted through the night and into the next day. The power went out early – lines were down everywhere. The landscape on Calvert Ave. was both beautiful and frightening – a perfect mirror for the world we live in every day – so amazingly beautiful and yet so horribly dangerous and deadly.

Catherine and I decided to go for a walk down our street – it was gorgeous and delightful, at first. The snow was swirling around us and we’d walked a long way when another transformer blew – sparks flew and another power line came down and hissed and wriggled on
the ground like a giant snake. At this, a five-year-old Catherine started to cry saying she was scared and could not make it back home. I remember so well telling her, “Catherine, follow me – I’m going in front – I’m going to keep you safe. Walk in my footsteps – let me make the trail. If you walk where I walked already we will be HOME in no time.

And I remember realizing that I was able to lead our daughter – to show her the way because I, too, had been shown the way – I have walked in other’s footsteps – especially those of the ONE who is the way, the truth, and the life – the ONE who leads me in a new way of living – a way of forgiving – the ONE who IS and who makes a place for us here and now and the ONE who is surely day-by-precious day – calling you and me on to greater works of reconciliation and LOVE and who even now is leading us HOME. That’s our story and, Class of 2017, it is YOUR STORY – as you travel into new ways of living and forgiving – loving and serving - we pray God’s greatest peace and blessing on your next steps and next chapters. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!