

WHERE YOU GO, I WILL GO

RUTH 1:15-17

A Service of Witness to the Resurrection feels like an Easter celebration, especially if we step back to the beginning of the Lent and remember the confession: “Ashes we are, to ashes we will return.” We know that, in the end, it is not about ashes but something else, something bigger, something brighter than all we can ask or imagine. It is about resurrection, the promise and reminder that God is faithful to us, even in death.

By the time that God called me to Tuscaloosa, Joe was somewhere between Ash Wednesday and Easter, but I suppose that we all are. When I first met Joe, it was clear to me that I would come to know him only through this church and his family, and I have. Chet Alexander went with me the first time that I visited him. Joe remembered Chet, but I am not sure that he ever figured out who I am. He remembered Lena Prewitt and Denise Yanaura when they visited with me, but his body was betraying him. His mind was starting to go. He was at the stage in one’s life when experiences are not about “taking in” but “letting go.”

Watching a loved one suffer when one knows how the story will end is a struggle. It bruises the spirit, and this is why we, as a congregation within the body of Christ, have been praying for Marie every step of the way. This is why I have been praying for Dana and Gena since before I met them. A bruised spirit aches and aches until the inevitable comes, and when it comes, it often feels like a surprise, because an extended illness has the ability to lull loved ones into a false sense of security. Because our husband, father or grandfather has been dying little-by-little every day for months, even years, we forget that Good Friday comes eventually, and it is not until we pass through Good Friday that we are able to celebrate Easter.

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One of the first things that Marie said to me on what I have come to think of as Joe's Good Friday---New Year's Day---is that she wanted this service to be a celebration, and as soon as she said that, I thought, "She understands. She understands that some experiences are much worse than death," and I am confident that Joe understands this. Otherwise, he would not have given as much of his life as he did to doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God, even to the point of being taken advantage of every once in a while. If any of us err, let us err not on the side of judgment but of compassion, even if it leads to crucifixion.

It seems appropriate that this afternoon's reading from the Hebrew Scriptures is from Ruth, because at the center of this story is the notion of *chesed*, loyalty or faithfulness that comes from commitment. In the Hebrew Scriptures, God is faithful to Israel, often when Israel is unfaithful to God. In Ruth, loyalty and faithfulness to God is defined in terms of family, often through the faithfulness of the women in the story.

Ruth's faithfulness to Naomi is something to celebrate: "Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge...Where you die, I will die; there I will be buried." The Spirit of God is alive and well and at work in human relationships, like the ones that Joe had with his wife, children and grandchildren.

One of the first things that Dana ever said to me is that when she thought of her dad she remembered what Senator Edward Kennedy said about his fallen brother Robert: "He was a good and decent man." Joe followed his children, and his children followed his lead. They remember him, as many of you remember him, as a gentle, generous and forgiving person (who happened to drive a motorcycle to work and was competitive on the tennis court unto a ripe old age).

I am told that Joe was a marvelous storyteller. I have looked through the collection of sermons that the church presented to him, and it is obvious to me that his work was well-researched, often provocative and well-written. Behind-the-scenes, when he was with the children and grandchildren (as I

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am sure he would have been with the great grandchildren), Joe created a fictional world, a safe place where children could be themselves, that revolved around a character named Stinky Dinky (I did not have the guts to ask if Stinky Dinky was based on anybody he knew).

Because I did not know Joe personally, I feel that I have been able to listen to your stories without filtering them through my experience, and there is grace in this situation. So without giving any thought to how I think he should be remembered, I am able to say without a doubt that the church appreciated his leadership, and on many occasions said to him, "Where you go, I will go," because we are convinced that where you go is where God is leading us.

Sunday after Sunday, God leads us to Christ's table, where Joe broke bread and poured wine again and again. I am told that the most powerful part of worship for him was celebrating the Eucharist. As a preacher, this is difficult for me to hear, but I understand, because as a preacher, I am deeply acquainted with the limits of language. Sometimes the best and only thing to do is to shrug heavenward and say, "Great is the mystery of faith!"

Something that I find comforting about our understanding of communion is the notion that every time that we feast at Christ's table, we do so with all who preceded us in the faith and with all who will come after us. When we break bread this afternoon, we do so knowing that Joe feasts on finest wheat. When we lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord, we know that Joe now understands what we are saying better than we do.

When we celebrate the Eucharist, we give thanks. Eucharist translated literally is "to give thanks." We give thanks for God's faithfulness to us in Jesus Christ, and as we celebrate the Sacrament this afternoon, somewhere in the corners of our hearts and the backs of our minds, we will be giving thanks for the ways in which Joe enriched the life of the church.

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I do not remember which daughter said it, but when I asked the daughters about what they learned about parenting from their father, the first response was, "He always said, 'I love you.'" Every time that we celebrate the Sacrament, God says, "I love you," to us. Every time that we remember Good Friday, Christ says, "I love you," to us. Every time we celebrate Easter, the Spirit of God fills our cups until they are running over with love for God and neighbor.

As we commit Joe's ashes to ashes and dust to dust, we do so in sure and certain hope that Easter stands triumphantly on the other side of Good Friday. Remember these words from Revelation: "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord, says the Spirit. They rest from their labors, and their works follow them." Remember these words from the Gospel of Matthew: "Well done, good and faithful servant...enter into the joy of your master." When death comes to you and me, "May the Lord do thus and so to us." Thanks be to God that the Lord has done thus and so to Joe. O the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are God's judgments and how inscrutable God's ways! For from God and through God and to God are all things. To God be glory forever. Amen.

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