

Behold, the Man

Funeral Oration for Mark Bayert
Saturday, December 12, 2009 - 2 PM
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Bloomington, MN

As Christians we find ourselves once more engaged in that season of penitence and expectation known as Advent which leads us eventually to ponder incarnation and what it means to us. C.S. Lewis ruminated of this subject and in his book entitled *Miracles* he came very close to saying what I've believed for longer than I can remember when he wrote,

We cannot conceive how the Divine Spirit dwelled within the created and human spirit of Jesus... What we can understand... is that our own... existence is... but a faint image of the Divine Incarnation itself – the same theme in a very minor key.

I can see my dear friend Mark lean forward and smile, pipe in hand as we sit by the fire, and I can hear him saying, "More, yes...but...how do you understand that?" My dear friend Mark. It feels so very strange today to speak in past tense of one who, to me, was closer than any brother of my own flesh and blood in tones of past-tense. My chest constricts when I think that it was only six days ago we planned to be together once more next spring and attend a Twins game in their new ballpark. (To Mark, the Twins became a poor substitute for his beloved White Sox – one thing he was proud to note that he and President Barak Obama held in common!) And, since that call Sunday evening, filled with gentle laughter and deep concern about his impending surgery, Mark and Carol have been on our hearts and minds daily.

Now, this afternoon we gather in our collective grief to remember Mark in thanksgiving to God for all that he meant to each and every one of us in this room and many, many others who his life and ministry touched. We gather to support Carol and Eve and all the family with our love and care in prayer. We hope to take from this experience something that might give us strength for this time of grief and loss. C.S. Lewis reminds us all in his reflection upon the loss of his wife in his work *A Grief Observed* that *the greater the love the greater the grief*. We should not be surprised or embarrassed by our feelings today my friends for Mark Bayert was deeply loved and he will be sorely missed.

Generations of old recognized and spoke of God's desire to be among us, to dwell among us as a beloved parent, to be present in our joy and in our sorrow. The incarnation of God in Christ makes the intention of God to be with us and to reveal the deep longing God holds for all of us in every day of our lives. Perhaps that is why the words of the Psalmist are so comforting, *You, O God, have been our dwelling place in all generations*.

It is odd to find myself in this place at Oak Grove Church, the pulpit where Mark preached and prayed. Fanny and I have been here several times throughout Mark's ministry at Oak Grove. We were here before the changeover of the sanctuary, when Mark and Carol first came to you all from Bismarck, ND. We were here for Eve's wedding and for Mark's retirement. It was wonderful to see how much had been accomplished with Mark and Carol's presence and competent leadership.

We were here... when was it Carol? – last summer when a train wreck (following a Twins vs Tigers confrontation) caused Fanny, Mark, and me to be late for an utterly scrumptious meal you had prepared for us banal sports fans. It would be so easy to go on with stories that will become all the more precious to us personally in the days to come. It seems my broken heart has been doing nothing more these last few days than send up images and remembrances of all of the times Mark and Carol have touched our lives personally.

Sometimes the most important thing in a whole day is the rest we take between two deep breaths, or the turning inwards in prayer for five short minutes. In 1993 I trudged to my office in Bismarck in a deep depression. I was coming back to work after a second heart attack and was so unsure of myself physically and mentally at the time. Somehow, my friend and colleague, sensed what was going on in my life for pastors learn early on how to hide out when we are in distress. I hadn't snookered Mark!

I see and feel that morning so intensely. The sun was streaming through my office window there in my office of the Northern Plains Conference, above the bicycle shop on West Broadway. It was about 8:30, when I walked Mark with a breakfast sandwich from the nearby McDonalds. I was surprised to see him. He didn't say much that I can recall. He knew, from our singing with the Bismarck Civic Chorus, how much the two of us shared a love for music. He had brought a selection from Mozart's Requiem with him on a CD. He simply said, "Jack, listen to this movement...it is so beautiful..." I put the disc into my CD player and we sat in silence as the ethereal music filled the room. It was a gift unlike any other that day. The haunting melody accompanied by the angelic singing voices spoke to me in ways I still have not fully comprehended. And, when it ended, Mark smiled as a tear coursed down his face. He said, "You can keep that and give it back to me at rehearsal. Take care." And, he was gone.

We know and remember so little of all the facets of even the most intimate of relationships with family, friends, colleagues... a fragment here, a brief word there, a picture in our mind's eye that we never tire of recalling... and yet, when we do remember, our hearts reconstruct these bits and pieces in such a way as to bring into our thoughts the presence of that person with whom the experience is shared. Such is our understanding of the mystical presence of the risen Christ whenever we partake of that simple sacred meal of bread and wine. We remember. And somehow, some way, Christ is here.

The same is true when we remember a loved one who is no longer with us physically but so with us in memory that the moment nearly suggests that we all were meant for another dimension – beyond time and space – limitless and timeless. Those pieces of memory regarding Mark are beginning to take shape in my heart this day and he is here urging me to *take courage, say more, be strong of faith* even though my heart is breaking at the thought. So, I attempt to behold the man I knew and loved.

Mark was a pastor. He deeply cared for people, all people so far as I knew. He had that quietness, that non-anxious presence, about him that seemed to still the maddening voices that course through all our lives when we are deeply troubled. He stood with those in need as a shield with the image of the Lion of Judah on its face. He stood at the ready with the vial of healing for those whom the world had wounded for he knew as surely as Ernest Hemingway that sooner or later the world wounds us all. These characteristics about Mark chased the demons of fear and trembling and lifted souls to hear the heavenly voices sing, "fear not, for behold we bring you good news of great joy..."

Mark was a preacher. I should have said that stronger. He was a PREACHER! He simply was the best I've ever heard – and before you count that statement as sentimental praise from a friend - I need remind you I've heard some of the world's most renowned preachers. Mark was to preaching what Roy Hobbs was to baseball: simply the best I ever saw or heard! Mark was unafraid to apply the Gospel, as he believed it, to our contemporary struggles to be disciples. He didn't truck with the pseudo-religious personalities of our day who seem so capable of gathering large crowds of people by telling them what they want to hear. Mark endeavored to say from the pulpit what he believed we needed to hear. That was the difference! His book of sermons, which was published near the end of his ministry, is a great example of his eloquence and insight and it is the one I turn to the most whenever I'm stumped to say something that is sorely needed. Capital punishment, war, gender issues, racial injustice, societal need – nothing escaped his discerning mind. Mark found a message from the Almighty, the God Who is still speaking, applicable to every vexation known to humanity.

He asked me once to preach a Lenten series of sermons at First Presbyterian Church in Bismarck and I asked him why? He was much more capable than I in the pulpit. I told him so. He chuckled. Mark often did that when, in his mind, he questioned what he was hearing. Why did he want me to speak for six weeks in his church? He explained that he felt the people at First Church needed to hear a different voice. So, he convinced me to do it. I felt so awkward for I knew what a terrific preacher he was. But, each time I would praise him to his face, he simply chuckled and then muttered something like, “thank you.”

Mark was a humble, gentle, man. No less an expert on men than Marlene Dietrich once said, “All real men are gentle; without tenderness, a man is uninteresting.” His tenderness perhaps came forth so clearly with those he dearly loved: Carol, Eve, Claire and Keith, Isabella and Claire and all of their family. He spoke of each with love and care. On Sunday evening, as we were speaking on the phone, he paused at one point and called out to his granddaughter, “I’ll be there in a minute, Clair...” It was such a reassuring promise. I could see his face beaming with pride and love for his family at that moment.

Mark Bayert was a man of learning. He consumed and digested great books and theater and motion pictures... he loved to talk of these with his friends and family. He was intrigued by the nuances of Gospel that he found in so many literary places that others simply saw as entertainment. As result, Mark was an inspiring teacher. It was Mark, the early morning chef, who taught us really how to prepare oatmeal! Fanny never fixes it that she doesn’t think of Mark’s advice on how to make it right.

Mark was unafraid to let God be God in his thinking. Some may have seen this as Mark’s God being less than “divine.” I sensed that Mark believed fully I the “iconoclastic God” spoken of by C.S. Lewis – that God Who seems to shatter himself when he comes into our lives – that God Who comes not as a well constructed plan or a mighty army, proud in purpose, proved in worth, but as a tiny baby – as a child, to lead our way! In this way Mark seemed to live most deeply the catechetical teaching of the Scottish church where it says that our chief end in life is to “glorify God and enjoy God forever!”

C.S. Lewis was one of his favorite writers. Marilynne Robinson, another. Dostoevsky, Calvin, Luther, John Updike, Kierkegaard, William Sloane Coffin, Buechner and many, many others glanced out from his library’s bookshelves. Mark undoubtedly held private conversations in his study with these learned writers and that enabled Mark to be a teacher par-excellence. Frederick Buechner wrote that

*It is important to tell, at least from time to time,
the secret of who we really and fully are – even if we tell it only to ourselves –
because otherwise we run
the risk of losing track of who we really and fully are
and little by little come to accept instead the highly
edited version which we put forth in hope that the
world will find it more acceptable than the real thing.*

Mark was a man who was comfortable with who he was. Fanny and I saw that so clearly when he and Carol sought to comfort our oldest son shortly after his divorce. The compassion shown James at that time was truly remarkable. Mark was even comfortable naming and speaking affectionately of his cars. Heck, when I was met Mark, I really didn’t know who “Reggie” was!

Perhaps the only time he was uncomfortable with who he was occurred whenever he knew he was going to play Sandy in tennis! As good as Mark was in the game, he rarely challenged her ability on the court. Sandy was to him what Mark was to me in that game. I never got close to defeating Mark in tennis. As Graham Greene wrote, *despair is the price one pays for setting*

oneself an impossible aim. In tennis, Mark knew the ecstasy of victory and the agony of defeat – especially to Sandy.

Mark was competitive... mostly in a good way. Be it table tennis or “Snarkel,” he loved a good contest with his family and friends! His joy showed on his face as he chided those against whom he played to try harder.

Mark was a humble man. It was his humility that enabled Mark, when the season came, to retire gracefully (he amazingly did so with an equilibrium rarely matched by others) from full-time service to the Church and to travel slowly, and sometimes too fast for Carol’s comfort, into these latter years of rest and contentment. Mark knew, from a lifetime of faith and service, that one doesn’t do this work of ministry for self-glory but for God, and God alone. I have no doubt that way back in his studies in college or seminary Mark ran into those immortal words of Pliny the Elder, a father of the Christian faith, who wrote,

True glory consists in doing what deserves to be written; in writing what deserves to be read; and in so living as to make the world happier and better for our living it.

I do not speak this afternoon of Mark Bayert, the legend for *legends are old men with canes known for what they used to be able to do.* No, Mark, right to the end, was still doing it – being Mark Bayert the man of God, giving others a glimpse of what God’s loving presence can mean for all of our lives.

Behold, this man. Son and brother, husband and father (grandfather and great grandfather), Pastor and Teacher, athlete and sports fan, disciple and prophet, singer of songs and teller of stories, lover of God and servant of Christ: Mark Bayert. In Mark we beheld, but for the time while he was with us, the presence of the Divine. He was that *same image in a minor key* that C. S. Lewis spoke of as a miracle. And, every one of us is the better for having known him and loved him.

When Fanny showed up Wednesday afternoon unexpectedly I took one look at her face and I knew. Grief was so evident that I knew that our dear friend Mark was gone. *Tell me it isn’t so,* I screamed in my mind. *God, tell me this isn’t happening. Isn’t there something we can do,* I asked the Almighty. Fanny told me later that I scream like a little child, in my anger and pain, “God, this isn’t fair!” I don’t recall ever feeling so lonely than in those first moments of coming to grips with Mark’s passing. I wished at that moment that I didn’t know the truth. A darned good lie would have been more acceptable. A friend, our dearest friend was gone.

Since that moment, I have been lifted up by the remembrances of all the wonderful times we shared with Mark and Carol. Somehow, these bits and pieces, are forming a whole for me at that is reassuring once more that nothing, not even death itself, can ever separate Mark or any of us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Today, Mark surely stands in the midst of that *Great Cloud of Witnesses* to the faith. There he is, ready to take his rightful seat in the bass section of that celestial chorus! *We feebly struggle, they in glory shine!*

Be at peace my friend. Be at peace.

Amen.

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