

“One of a Kind”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
April 9, 2016

Jerry K. Carter
February 6, 1945 – March 19, 2016

Matthew 5: 14-16
2 Timothy 4: 1-8
John 14: 1-6, 25-27

Now, if this were a “normal” funeral meditation, I would start by saying that we bring with us lots of emotions today, that death is a shock to our system, and that we will be relying on God’s grace and faith in the resurrection to move forward as children of God. All of that is certainly true, and I will touch on those things in a bit.

But this is not going to be a “normal” funeral meditation. Because Jerry Carter was far from “normal!”

No, Jerry made it very clear to me that when this time came to give thanks to God for his life, he wanted it to be a party, a celebration. Honestly, I think what it’s becoming is a roast, which I know Jerry would love!

So, in keeping with his wishes, let me start by doing what Jerry loved to do: share a few stories. One is the first time I met Jerry. He was a member of the search committee that called me as pastor of John Knox thirteen years ago. And the first time I met him was at the dinner and interview the committee had with me and Debbie at Boulder Creek Restaurant in Brownsburg. What I remember is that Jerry couldn’t talk. Let me clarify: Jerry’s voice was more of a raspy whisper, as his vocal cords had been damaged after one of his surgeries. So, as the committee members asked me questions and I responded, I had to listen a little more intently to Jerry, due to his voice. I wouldn’t say Jerry was intimidating, but he was strong in his opinions, and I could tell he was sizing me up as we talked. I made a mental note after meeting him: “He’s someone I need to pay attention to and get to know well.”

When we moved here four months later, the next time I saw him, I almost didn’t recognize him. Not because of his appearance, but because he had had surgery on his vocal cords. He was no longer talking like a life-long smoker, but what he had always sounded like his whole life, even though it was new to me. And I made another mental note: “Oh crap, this guy’s voice is back.” And I didn’t say “Oh crap.” I don’t know, maybe that’s what Mary and Andrew and others were thinking, as well!

Second, I heard from others that Jerry had once pulled a prank on my predecessor, Roger Dean. Jerry and some of the other deacons years earlier had prepared communion for Sunday morning worship. Well, Jerry and his conspirators decided to pull one over on Roger, and instead of filling this chalice with grape juice, they filled it with real wine. I’ve been told that when Roger

picked up the cup and drank from it, the look on his face was priceless. And I can just see Jerry sitting in the back, giggling and laughing and then giving Roger a hard time about it all after worship.

But you know what they say about karma, right? In some ways I think God had a good laugh at Jerry's expense some years later. Jerry served as the president of our Board of Trustees, back when we were still in the old sanctuary. For those of you who do not know that space, it was oriented opposite this space, and was long and narrow, and did not have much natural lighting. The other thing to know is that for the last several years, we have used during Advent and Christmas what we call "Advent Visitors." They are the characters in the nativity story, but they are figures who are about four-five feet tall, and we move them around each Sunday in Advent until they are all up front on Christmas Eve. The first ones who come out on the first Sunday of Advent are Mary and Joseph, and they are usually in the rear of the sanctuary.

Anyway, one Saturday in early-December, Jerry, as the president of the Trustees, got a call from the security company that the alarm was going off. Jerry told them to send the police, and he drove down to meet the officers. Jerry let them in the building, and walked around with them to make sure things were okay. Turns out it was a false alarm, as is often the case.

But when they got to the sanctuary, Jerry was standing to the right of one of the officers as he opened the door at the back of the sanctuary. And in the dark, the officer saw what looked like to him a person in the shadows. Well, it's Mary and Joseph! But the officer didn't know this, and he drew his gun. Jerry saw this, realized that it's not a person but the holy family, put his hand on the officer's shoulders and said, "Don't shoot!" They turn the lights on, and everyone realized what was going on. I would have LOVED to have heard Jerry's explanation to the Trustees - and to the Education Team who put the visitors all together - for why there was a bullet hole in one of the parents of Jesus!

Those stories, and the many others we all have of Jerry, are reminders of the great joy God brought us through knowing Jerry Carter. Humor, laughter, silliness, joy - those are just some of the many ways God's light shone brightly through Jerry. Whenever I hear this passage from Matthew which we heard Tom read earlier, it reminds me that God has given each of us a light to shine before others, not to be hidden or put under a bushel basket. That light of God shines through our personalities, our gifts, and our talents that we share in relationship with others. And there is no question that Jerry shone his light to a world that had so much need. Just look around and see all who are here; we are the proof of that fact by our presence here today.

To be honest, for many of us we might first think of laughter and jokes and humor when Jerry comes to mind. But the depth of his character and his faith were indicative of just how much God's light shone through this man. Jerry was always asking about others, always wanting to know how someone was doing after a surgery or an illness. In the midst of his own illnesses or recuperations, he was thinking of others, and asking us to pass along his greetings and love.

But that was emblematic of Jerry's caring nature, of his desire that others' lives be made better, and of his willingness to offer a listening ear or helping hand to allow that to happen. It was a weekly hug at church for a young woman who was struggling in life, moments that allowed her to feel God's presence in a way she otherwise would not. It was an encouraging word to a father whose son was incarcerated, and made that man feel strengthened by God's providence and care. It was the time he spent with students he taught, not just the skill set he gave them in the printing trade, but the caring heart he offered to young men and women who did not know that level of love in their own lives. It was the complement he paid someone, the willingness to stay and talk beyond the obligatory, "How are you doing?", the quick-witted Jerryisms ("You're fine, how am I?") – all of which made you feel valued and special and loved. That was God working through one of his children in a very unique and particular way.

I think five years after we had been here, Bob and Barbara Weetman asked me and Debbie to go out to dinner with them. We said, "Sure!", and I think my parents were in town and they watched the girls. The Weetmans picked us up, and we drove out to Brownsburg, to Boulder Creek Restaurant. I didn't think anything of it – Debbie and I were just happy to be out on a date with adults! But when we got there, we went to the same private dining area, and who was there but the entire search committee, celebrating that anniversary. And Jerry had been one of the primary conspirators in making that anniversary celebration happen.

Now, was Jerry Carter perfect? HA! Did he ever get under your skin? Oh yeah! How many of you had the experience of being rankled by something Jerry said to you? Yeah, me too. I will admit – and I think he would admit – that he spoke before he thought, and just like many of us have, would regret what he said after the fact. But part of that, I believe, came from his passion and care for others, and how he wanted others to be the best they could be. And often, at least for me, I realized later that what may have rankled me was actually what I needed to hear – and I would thank God for that.

Paul says to Timothy: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to me on that day" (2 Timothy 4:7-8). There is no question Jerry Carter has kept the faith throughout this race of life that he has run. And he has received the crown of righteousness that is promised to us all, as we live out our calling as disciples of our Lord and Savior.

There is no question Jerry fought and fought and fought, through so much physical illness, surgeries, and trials. And for the last two weeks of his life, when he was in the hospital, it was an unusual situation. For because of the flu restrictions that were in place at Methodist Hospital at that time, the only three people who actually saw Jerry during his last ten days were Mary, Andrew, and myself. That's left so many of us with a sense of emptiness and grief, as we didn't feel we were able to say our goodbyes in person. Let me share two things I've thought about in light of that.

One is that that was a sacred time for Mary and Andrew and Jerry, to be together as a family, to truly walk this last part of the journey together. Jerry's love of his family was a model to us all of how to give gratitude to God for how God has blessed us in our lives. He married his high school sweetheart, and he and Mary shared fifty-plus years together. Mary has a stack of notes at home of "I Love You's" that Jerry would leave for her whenever he went and played golf. (That's a lot of notes, Mary!) And he was incredibly proud to be the father of Andrew Carter, and all that Andrew had done and become. So for them to have that time together was very special, and I can bear witness to that.

The second thing is that, in many ways, I think Jerry would want our lasting memory of him to be how we always knew him – not in a hospital bed, but living life to the fullest. He would want – and God would want – us to be witnesses of all that God did through him.

So while you may not have been able to say your goodbyes in person, hold onto the memories and Jerryisms that are so meaningful. And perhaps the best way to say goodbye is not to say goodbye at all, but rather to shine Jerry's light in your own life of faith. Tell that colleague, family member, or friend just how much they mean to you, rather than assuming they know. Stop and truly listen to the person who is simply wanting someone to care. In the midst of life's struggles, remember a short, chubby guy being willing to face life's adversities with humor, integrity, and faith, and know that with God's help, you will make it through.

One of the scriptures that was so meaningful to Jerry's faith was the passage I shared from John. When Jesus spoke to his disciples, he knew they were worried, scared, and uncertain about what the future held if he was not going to be with them. To ease their anxiety, Jesus assures them there is a place waiting for them in his father's kingdom. "In my Father's house, there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? I will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also." That is a great assurance to me, I know it was for Jerry, and I hope it is for you, as well. For in our faith in the resurrection, life does not end with the diseases we suffer from, the pain we endure, or the heartbreak we experience. Instead, eternal life is promised by the one who is "the way and the truth and the life." It is because of that faith that I know I will see and you will see Jerry and so many others very, very soon, as we will meet in the many dwelling places that our Lord has prepared for us.

Jerry has entered that room which Jesus promised him, and I'm sure the Masters is on the television. And as Jerry always liked to say, when you asked him how we has doing, "I'm still on the top side of dirt!"

Yes you are, my friend – and you always will be.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.