

Funeral Homily  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
November 7, 2020

**Ken Duggins**  
March 3, 1950 – November 1, 2020

**Luke 15: 11-32**

I have to admit something right from the start, and that is that God and I are not on the best of terms right now. Have you ever felt that way? Most of the time, this happens for me when I just don't understand why certain things take place the way they do. Something I had hoped for and expected to go my way goes in the opposite direction. Someone I care about experiences heartache and disappointment that seems to come out of nowhere. It's usually in those moments that my prayers to God have a bit more fire in them, so to speak. Do you know that feeling?

So, when Patty called me a week ago today to tell me Ken was being taken to the hospital, and then later to share that he had a tear in his aorta, I was numb and stunned, just like many of us were when we heard that news. And then, when she called on Sunday to tell me that Ken had died, I honestly couldn't believe it. He was literally here in church one week earlier. He was at our governing board meeting six days earlier on Zoom. This doesn't seem real that we are all here today. Needless to say, for me at least, God has a lot of explaining to do.

Jeff Roberts, one of Ken's fellow elders here at John Knox, put it best this week: life is very fragile. We do not always know what may happen in the next year, month, day, or hour to dramatically alter our lives. We have experienced that this year living through a never-ending pandemic. We experience that whenever the call comes saying we have cancer. We experience that when someone we love dearly dies suddenly without warning. Life is indeed fragile, and we are forced today to face that stark reality.

My father-in-law died in a similar fashion as Ken. Three years ago, while on vacation with his wife, he laid down for a nap, and never woke up. Our family lived through the same unanswered questions and shock that we are asking and experiencing today. To this day, many of those questions are left unanswered, which is hard to reconcile. One thing that started to help me process my grief was being with people who would listen, who were caring and patient, and didn't give me pithy replies like, "Everything happens for a reason." Finding people who I could trust and allow me to be me – looking back, that was most helpful as I lived through those difficult days and weeks and months wondering why this happened the way that it did.

And Ken was one of those people who was there to listen in my grief. He was patient and kind, and he gave me space to be honest and transparent. It was one of his gifts – one that I treasured through the more than fifteen years we knew each other. I also believe it was one of the ways God spoke to me and helped me through such a difficult year in my life, when both Debbie's father and my father died within 10 months of each other.

I imagine we all appreciate having routines that become part of the rhythm of our lives. I certainly value that and rely on that, both in my work here at the church and in my personal life at home. On Sunday mornings, I'm sure other churches have similar routines like we do here at John Knox. You're used to seeing people in particular situations, worshipping God in services, and learning of God's Word in classes. Those routines help us to stay grounded amid all the turmoil we may be living through.

Well, one of my routines on Sunday mornings included Ken Duggins. About twenty minutes before the 9:00 service would begin, Ken would come in the church office and start making copies for Patty's adult education class. If I was in my office, he would come and stand in the doorway, asking me how I was doing, and he would share what was going on in his life. Most of the time, he was bragging on his family – I'll be honest, he just wouldn't shut up about you guys sometimes! Some days I had more time to talk than others. But Ken was always there, and I came to appreciate his presence as part of my preparation for leading worship each week.

As we all know, Ken was the yin to Patty's yang! I cannot tell you how many times it made me laugh to see Ken come up here with Patty to lead a minute for mission in worship about our Mother's Day collection of clothing for the local women's shelter. Ken would be up here, holding a big pair of women's underwear, and you could tell how much he didn't want to be up here! But he did it – along with so many other things that were out of his comfort zone – because of how much he loved Patty. He supported her in so many ways because he believed in what she stood for and would do anything to help her succeed. I imagine that is how many of us experienced Ken – a father, a brother, a friend who would do anything he could to show you how much you were loved.

Which is why the parable of the prodigal son fits Ken so well. So many times, our attention in this familiar story is focused on the two sons – the one who was responsible, staying home to manage the affairs of his father, and the one who took his portion of the estate and squandered it away. We make judgments about who is right and who is wrong, or who deserves to be loved and who should be excluded from grace. For many of us, those perspectives likely come from where we see ourselves in the story, and where our prejudices or prejudgments place others in the story.

But when we consider the father in the parable, I believe that is where we witness God moving through the life of Ken Duggins. The father loved his sons equally and abundantly. It did not matter what either had done – the father welcomed both with joy and grace. He was ecstatic that the son whom

he thought had died returned to his home, and he threw a huge party to celebrate. When his other son expressed bitterness toward his younger brother, the father made it clear that he loved them both equally.

That was how Ken made you feel – loved for who you are and not judging you for what you may have been. He knew he wasn't perfect and he hadn't been perfect in his life. But he knew what it meant to be a beloved child of God, and he lived his life in a way that others might know that same embrace of the father in the parable: "We have to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."

Jocelyn read earlier that familiar passage from the Book of Ecclesiastes, one which reminds us of the various times we live through in life. What gives me hope in reading this passage is that all of those times that we live through are balanced with the other side of that experience. We will not always be weeping – we will also experience laughter. We will not always be at war – we will also experience peace. We will not always mourn – we will also find times to dance and be joyful. God's love and grace in Jesus Christ helps us move through those different times, and the Spirit helps us experience that hope through people and moments that remind us we are not alone on our journey.

Every season that we experience here will ultimately be in the purview of the grace of God who declares that while there is pain in grief in this time, there is also hope in the time to come. We are witnesses to the resurrection hope we have in Jesus Christ, and we bear witness to that hope throughout the times we live through now – times of planting and harvesting, times of tearing apart and mending together, times of death and new life. We are all here today because we have experienced that hope through one of God's beloved children, Ken Duggins. Now we are called to bear witness to that light just as Ken bore witness throughout his earthly life. Yes, it is hard. Yes, it is painful now. But in time, God will heal and make whole, and we will have strength to tell others what Ken truly knew and believed: that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

I guess in the end, God and I will be alright – thankfully, God is big enough to handle my struggles and doubts. My prayer is that your faith may be strengthened, too, even when it is stretched to its limit. I am grateful for how God touched me through the life of Ken Duggins. As we go from this place, may we all give thanks for a life well-lived as a disciple of God's Son, Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God. Amen.