

Face To Face, Now and Then

A Service of Worship
In Celebration of the Life of Norman J. Campbell
(October 7, 1937 to January 20, 2014)

Psalm 16: 5-8, 11; I Corinthians 13: 4-13

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Transcription of the written sermon

Let me begin by expressing my appreciation to First Congregational Church for giving the honor and privilege of sharing in this celebration of the life of Norman J. Campbell and to Pastor Tim Vander Haan for graciously allowing me to share in this service with him. It means a great deal to me to be able to be part of Norm's funeral service; he was such a dear friend and for many years one of my faithful parishioners at Christ Community Church, with Maureen and their daughters.

Over the past year we were in touch, hoping to go out to lunch. We even had a date but as the time came had to cancel; Norm's health continued to deteriorate and treatments did not have a positive outcome. I think it was December 9 I sat with him and Maureen and Wendy. He had received the dreaded news – his body could not tolerate the only measure that might save him. It was a sober moment. For the first time we spoke of plans for where we are today – celebrating his life, he having gone on before us.

Shortly before Christmas Nancy and I stopped in. In the course of our conversation, Maureen said, "Are you going to Florida?" I said, "Yes, only a short get-away, January 4 to 19." Then I looked at Norm and said, "and you behave yourself!" That's the way it was with us; even pointing to his end we shared a bit of humor. He was so easy to be with.

Well, we went to Florida and returned last Sunday evening. At 8:00 am Monday, Maureen called. Norm had breathed his last at 4:52 am. Maureen said, "He knew you had returned and he could let go." I found it remarkable. The last week was very difficult but he held on until he knew all would be in order, thinking not of himself but his loved ones.

Your presence here attests to what I think would be universally agreed on – This was a beautiful human being. Being human, he must have had an imperfection or two but I never detected it. I admired and respected Norm and held him in deep affection. He was so easy to be with, his wry sense of humor and lightness of being. And he was always the same – easy, comfortable, natural – even speaking of what he desired for this service.

From the moment I hear of a death and know I will be bringing the funeral meditation, I begin to think of the person and the Scriptures. That's probably a peculiar preacher's thing, but I always desire to paint a portrait of the person in the framework of the biblical story that has shaped us. With someone like Norm one could go in many directions but finally one must choose the contours of the character one would paint.

I have chosen two scriptural passages from which to reflect with you on the life of this one we loved and have lost awhile.

From the Psalms, Psalm 16: 5-8, 11. Psalm 16 is one of my favorites. Beginning with verse 5, the Psalmist expresses a sense of deep wellbeing.

The boundary lines have fallen to me in pleasant places;
I have a goodly heritage.

He is full of gratitude for his human situation – referring to Israel's coming into the land of Israel when the tribes divided the land by casting lots. The Psalmist is pleased with his human situation. But his wellbeing is rooted in something deeper.

I keep the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand
I shall not be moved.

In the Hebrew "before me" is literally "before my face." That being so, he is steadfast whatever human experience brings him.

His heart is glad;
His soul rejoices.

So confident is he that he cannot conceive of being given up to *Sheol* – the realm of the dead. One commentator writes:

It can be read as the general prayer of the faithful who, without any doctrine of resurrection or eternal life to explain just how, nonetheless trust the Lord to keep them with such total confidence that they cannot imagine a future apart from life in God's presence. (James L. Mays, *Interpretation: Psalms*, p. 88)

Again the Psalmist exclaims,

You show me the path of life.
In Your presence there is fullness of joy;
in Your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

Were we to read this poem in the original Hebrew we would see a beautiful juxtaposition. In verse 8, as noted above, “before me” is literally “before my face.” In verse 11, “in Your presence” is literally “before Your face.”

God before my face;
I before God’s face.

Further, God at my right hand keeps me secure. At God’s right hand are pleasures forevermore.

The Psalmist lived with a vivid sense of God’s presence. That awareness kept him steady in all the vicissitudes of life. That sense of trust was so strong even the fear of death, of loss, was transcended. He lived with fullness of joy. He was present to the presence of God.

You must sense why I would select such a scripture when thinking of Norm – He lived with God before his face – with a God-consciousness woven into his being from a child, and it made him steady, strong and confident.

Like the Psalmist, God-consciousness made him a rock, gave him a place to stand and not be moved.

My second text is Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 13, verses 4-13. Often called Paul’s Hymn of Love, it is familiar and beloved. Verses 4 to 7 give love’s marks, its aspects –

Kind, not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Comment is hardly needed; Love’s portrait is Norm’s portrait, is it not? That is simply who he was – Love embodied.

But the passage goes on –

Love never ends.

And then St. Paul speaks of our human situation. What called forth this beautiful portrait of Love was the situation in the Corinthian congregation. There seemed to be a game going on regarding who possessed the greatest spiritual gifts. And Paul does not put those gifts down even though they are causing division in the congregation. Instead he says,

...I will show you a still more excellent way.

And that way is the way of Love, a way he contrasts with the various spiritual gifts that were competing with each other in Corinth. Paul writes, “Love never ends.” But that is not so for the other gifts – prophetic gifts, the gift of speaking in tongues, knowledge, prophecy – they are limited and will come to an end.

But not Love.

Paul compares the present state of the congregation at Corinth to that of childhood, using himself as an example.

When I was a child, I spoke like a child,
I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child;
when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.

And then he comes to the point I want to make in regard to our beloved Norm.

For now we see in a mirror dimly
but then we will see face to face.
Now I know only in part; then I will know fully,
even as I have been fully known.

There you have it – Face to Face Now and Then.

Norm knew the Psalmist’s secret – The Lord before my face, rock solid, unmovable, steady, deep assurance. He knew as well that all he knew and experienced were partial, in process, a dim glimpse of the Ultimate Mystery.

But for him all he glimpsed dimly has come into sharp focus – now he sees fully, clearly, for he sees “face to face.”

Face to face – for us who grieve, in trust we see but only dimly – our “now” sees in faith. We long for the “Then” of full vision but, in the meantime, we are confident that our beloved Norm sees clearly and is lost in wonder, love and grace.

Face to face in the Presence in fullness of joy.

Well done, good and faithful servant!