

**A Witness To The Christian Faith
at the death of Judge Billy Tunstall Jr.
Sunday, July 29, 3:00pm
Pastor Phil Thrailkill
John 6:35-48**

This hot July afternoon we come together for several reasons, and the first is to worship the Living God and give thanks for the great mercies shown to us in Jesus Christ, who on our behalf has conquered sin, death, and the grave in his cross and mighty resurrection and who is our hope.

Our second purpose is to remember our brother in Christ Billy Tunstall Jr., who- after a four year heroic battle against cancer- on Friday succumbed to its relentless assault and was ushered into the presence of God, there to rest in Paradise and await the resurrection of the dead at the end of the age and the arrival of the kingdom of God upon the earth.

Finally, we come together to surround this grieving family with our presence, our prayers, and our promise that neither they nor Billy will be forgotten in days to come.

As an addition, we remember our own griefs and losses, and we face our common human frailty and eventual mortality with the questions, How am I living? and, Do I know the God who alone has power over death? This is why we are here, and we are especially honored to have so many members of the South Carolina judiciary with us today to honor their friend and colleague. It is a sobering thing to see you march into God's church in robed ranks, knowing that to you is committed the administration of the law which remains a bulwark against social chaos. It was only a little over eighteen months ago that I saw many of you in Hartsville for the death of my friend Judge Jim Murdock, and at the end of this service we will intercede for you with a prayer written first for that occasion. I spoke with Jim's wife Rainey only yesterday, and she sends you her regards.

I was relieved when the family requested that two others speak today, Judge Armstrong and Billy's former partner Rauch Wise. That is because I had access to only a small slice of Billy's life. It was around mid-May that I made my first phone call to Billy and Dee-L in New York where Billy was receiving a final round of treatments. Rev. Terry Martin, my predecessor, had encouraged me to call Billy- though it was a month before the change of appointments- because it was likely I would do his funeral. It's not that we were not praying for good days- or even a cure, only that Terry knew how much easier it is to bury someone you've gotten to know

a bit, and I am thankful for that courtesy. Our calls were not long, but Billy was glad to hear from his new preacher, and each time after I prayed for him he was genuinely thankful. Life is such a precious gift, and to know that your days are shortened adds a certain edge and sobriety to life, and so it did for Billy, who was always- by what I have heard- quite a jokester and player of pranks.

My personal calls were all either at Self Hospital or Hospice House. I was shown pictures of happier days, and I always noticed that Billy was never alone. The waiting room was full of friends and family there to keep vigil with one another.

Over the visits I began to build up an outline of Billy. I learned he was a fast driver, and that he may have been the only man in South Carolina given a license to hunt deer with the bumper of his car, so many were his encounters on the back roads around Greenwood, but such are the privileges of the judiciary.

His sister Lori-Ann was touched to remember Billy's loyalty to her during her several surgeries to correct the damage to her hands and feet from rheumatoid arthritis.

Hope remembered what a delight it was to her, and what an embarrassment to Billy, for her to be called his daughter rather than his younger sister by seventeen years when she made visits to the court house.

With Tommy he shared a love of cars and of telling stories that cannot be retold in church, most of which concerned Myrtle Beach!

His two children Bess and Tee bear the mark of the law which they inherited from their father. They remember hanging around his office as kids and just how much he seemed to enjoy his work, and as long as they practice, something of Billy's blend of gravity and humor will continue through them.

Bess especially remembers his mentoring after she entered practice and his uncanny ability to boil a complex legal question down to a pithy and accurate summary. Her respect and affection for him grew through such exchanges, and he was privileged to perform her wedding this past December.

The two children he inherited from his second marriage- Lexy and Dee-K, were also dear to his heart, and his habit of reading bed-time stories to Dee-K will be sorely missed. It was in a phone call from Dee-L that I learned of how he spoke to Dee-K about his possible death and not to be afraid.

Friends, there is always more to a man than what we see on the surface of professional and public life, and we simply do not know the desperate prayers Billy prayed for all who depended on him and which he was so hesitant to leave behind.

To his mother and father, Billy Sr. and Doris, we agree with what you know all too well, that is unfair in the extreme to have to bury a child, but until the coming of God's kingdom and its banishment of death from the earth, this will happen, and out of this pain you will be able to comfort others. So grieve and hold one another and remember that the son you conceived and loved is now cared for in a way that goes beyond the best of parental love. You gave him to God years ago in baptism, and today we know God is fulfilling his side of the promise.

Over the next weeks and months members of this family will have the privilege of having people come up to them in public and recount a *Billy* story. Already we have heard of an adoption where Billy allowed an older sibling to put on his robes, bang the gavel and announce, "Adoption granted." Or a story heard only yesterday of a local waitress with a worn out pair of colorful Converse tennis shoes; the next time Billy came in he brought her a new pair. And let this be noted. Billy was a fighter, and that is to his credit. When the doctors had only bad reports, words that meant "it's time to go home and die," he did not believe them but kept researching and traveling and doing all he could to hold on to the unbearable sweetness of this life. For four more years he proved them wrong. Medicine did much for this man, and we are grateful for it, but there comes a time when the art and science of doctoring come to an end, and so it did for Billy early Friday morning. The battle was over, and Billy left this life for the next.

In the hurly-burly of this life with so much to see and do, it is easy for the church and its faith to be sidelined while more pressing and urgent concerns crowd in. And so it is with many professionals. But I am glad to say that this family eagerly welcomed my presence and quickly let me into their world. Every visit was closed with Scripture and prayer as we reached out to touch God together on Billy's behalf. On Monday, when death seemed only a few hours away, we anointed Billy's forehead with the sign of the cross as a reminder of his baptism and asked the Lord Jesus to receive him when the time came. I especially remember standing at the bedside and asking Billy, "Billy, do you trust in Jesus Christ?" receiving his Yes, and then reciting the Apostles' Creed together with those in the room. In an unguarded moment I laughed and told the family I'd made so many visits to Billy that I had nearly run out of appropriate Scripture passages and would soon have to go through the cycle a second time should he hang around much longer!

It is the peculiar burden of Family Court judges to have rivers of human pain cross their desks. Divorce decrees, broken promises, shattered lives, wounded

children and all that goes along with such. How hard it must be to keep your perspective when to you is entrusted the administration of a system that seeks to bring order to so much of the effects of human sin and frailty, and yes- sometimes even human evil in cases of abuse and neglect. So pray for those who are here today, for those among whom Billy once had an honored place. Let Sunday morning worship be for them not a time to answer questions but a place, like you, to draw near to God for strength and wisdom.

Our final word is clear and simple. Billy Tunstall Jr. was a sinner in need of a Savior, and his life- all too brief by our estimation- was, just like ours, a mixture of faithfulness and unfaithfulness, of noble sacrifices and unnecessary sin, of decisions appreciated and regretted, of promises kept and promises abandoned. Billy was a beloved mixed bag, no different than any, though perhaps written on a bit larger stage of the law and the bar and the bench. And our trust and his must not be in our name, our legacy, our offices, our good needs, or our worldly accomplishments, none of which impress God at all.

Only one thing finally matters, that we humble ourselves before our heavenly Father, the judge of all, and accept what he has provided for us in Jesus Christ: a Savior, a strong friend, a true guide through the life, one who has defeated Satan, assumed our sin in his death, and opened the kingdom of God to all who will follow him in this life and into the next. Only Jesus can say and then enforce the promise of John 6:40, “For this is the will of my Father, that every one who sees the Son and believes in him would have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”

It is good to see you in God’s church on a Sunday afternoon, and this is Billy’s final gift to us all, that on this day Jesus Christ would be honored and we would be challenged to fresh faithfulness in our lives and all their duties. And if this service is more than a social courtesy, then perhaps next Sunday, and the one after that, will find you humbling yourself, putting aside your pleasures and diversions, and lining up with all the other sinners for a reminder of what finally matters. Don’t miss today’s opportunity to comfort this family in their loss and to set you feet on the path that leads from this life into the next. Be sobered. Be watchful. But above all, be ready. Seek the God who is already seeking you this very afternoon.

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