

**A Witness to the Gospel at the Death of Dave Chastain**  
**Mark 1:16-20, 2:13-17**  
**Pastor Phil Thrailkill, Main Street UMC**

One of the privileges of being a pastor is having the next-to-last word on someone's life, the last word being left to the Lord who alone knows the secrets of every heart. The word we use for a funeral sermon is *eulogy*, and in Greek it simply means *a good word*, which in Dave's case is also *an easy word* since both his life and his death are full of evidence of a life well lived in love of God and all sorts of service to others.

The axes of Dave's life were, as Jesus said, the love of God and the love neighbor even as we love ourselves. Not perfect in any direction, but then that's not what's required, but steady and faithful and accompanied by both duty and joy. For Dave the word love soon merged with the word loyalty, and to him they were two sides of one reality. When he found a place to serve, he was likely to stick with it for a long time. Thirty-four years in national service through the military after finishing the Naval Academy in '66, whose distinctive hymn we just sang. Or, for years using his facility in Spanish to help create and then staff an ELA program at the Greenwood Library since every immigrant needs to learn the language to be a good citizen, or even a good guest. It's wasn't enough for Dave to defend the country; he had to teach potential new Americans how to speak and write English. Dave equipped others for a better, fuller life, and this is what love and service look like.

He was the kind of referee in soccer and lacrosse for over two decades that would take the time to explain a call or a rule to a young player who had an honest question, sometimes to the irritation of those who wanted, as they said, *to get on with the game*. Dave's love of instructing others was evident in his eight years of teaching all the courses of *Disciple Bible Study* and often -to the delight of his student's once they got used to it- taking them on long tangents of biblical and ancient history before returning to the text at hand. But what do you expect of a born-Texan, an Eagle Scout, a Methodist Christian, and an Academy grad, each of which teaches the virtues of service and loyalty and teamwork, which were deep and abiding themes in Dave's life. Dave's life in a sense answers a pressing social question, Where are good men built? and how can we build a few more of them? because they have an effect all out of proportion to their numbers. They leave a legacy of substance. The question of

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life is not, What did you achieve? but, What kind of person did you become?

It's always touching to sit down with a new widow, as in Carol's case, and hear stories interwoven with tears and laughter about the particularities of the man she loved. "He was a structured gentleman," she said as he sat upright- as if to imitate Dave- and then with a smile added, "but he was always late."

One Sunday morning in a Delaware winter after a big snow covered the roof, Carol, Jennifer, and Jeff sat in the car in their church clothes waiting for dad, and all were impatient. Apparently Dave was also tired of being hurried along beyond his natural rhythms and had a head of steam worked up. His frustration came out as he slammed the front door behind him with unusual intensity. It was just enough vibration to start a mini-avalanche on the roof, and it all came down on Dave's head. "He was covered," said Carol as she broke out in laughter again in my presence. I'm told it was hard not to laugh all the way to church and all the way through the service that Sunday. The joy of the Lord was upon everyone but David. Dad was hot under the collar, and the Lord sure enough cooled him off with a gift from above! Shall we now dare call him in death what he was in life, *the late* Dave Chastain, something we would never say to his face? Hey Dave up above, ever seen an avalanche?

As Carol reminisced, the church and what was then called MYF- Methodist Youth Fellowship- kept coming up. It's where Carol and Dave met. Some of the great romances that blossomed into faithful marriages started with a glance and a smile on Sunday evenings in a church basement! Once, when they were later youth counselors, there was a talent show with skits, and Dave was one of three guys standing behind a skirted table singing. When the song was over they walked out from behind the table in colored boxer shorts to the howls of all present. This serious man could surprise you at times. He was the kind of man Jeff's friends wanted to be around, a man who had time for boys and called them *my guys*.

"He was a quiet, thoughtful man," said Carol. A real friend and companion, a good man, which is high praise from a young girl who married a young soldier at age twenty, when both were young and foolish and the nation was at war in Vietnam. Dave loved Civil War history, and Carol's stories are full of tales of their trips to Europe, their bookshelves full of books about the world beyond our borders. Dave was a good husband, a loyal American, a citizen of the world, and a follower of Jesus Christ who lived and died well. To die at home pain free with your wife holding your

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hand is as good as it gets when it comes time to say “Goodbye life and hello Lord.” It was a good handoff from a grieving, grateful wife to one they both trusted. That Carol left her teaching post to care for him the last months means she and he lived deeply into precious vows taken on a happier day, “... in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death.”

We all wanted the numbers to get up past the bar so Dave could get that new liver and prayed to that end. Once or twice he got close, but it was not to be, and during my visits with Dave at Self Hospital and at their home, he was always eager to have me pray. To hold the hand of a old soldier and a soldier of the cross and to ask for God’s mercy and care is a deep moment, and at the end of such a prayer I wanted to add not only an Amen to my prayer but a salute to them both for the battle they were in, even though I’ve never served in the Armed Forties but in the Lord’s army. At my last visit several days before he died, I read him the first seven verses of Psalm 86. It seemed to fit the reality we were facing, which was that life was short and death near:

“Incline thy ear, O LORD, and answer me,  
     for I am poor and needy.  
 Preserve my life, for I am godly;  
 save thy servant who trusts in thee.  
 Thou art my God;  
 be gracious to me, O Lord,  
     for to thee do I cry all the day.  
 Gladden the soul of thy servant,  
     for to thee, O Lord, do I lift up my soul.  
 For thou, O Lord, art good and forgiving,  
 abounding in steadfast love to all who call on thee.  
 Give ear, O LORD, to my prayer;  
 hearken to my cry of supplication.  
 In the day of my trouble I call on thee,  
     for thou dost answer me.”

From where does virtue and deep goodness come from? Why are some men over time become good and true and faithful and full of interest in the world, kind and generous, while others- my father would say- are not worth the gunpowder it would take to blow them to hell? Why? Because somewhere along the way they are

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shaped to value something larger than themselves, something worth loving and serving beyond the immediate demands of their own appetites and temporary curiosities. And at the center of this difference of awareness is the presence of a God to whom we are accountable in this life and in the life to come.

Dave was perhaps one of the last of a generation of young men who reached maturity before the culture went into the mid-sixties revolution from which we've not yet recovered and which is still bearing bad fruit, say in the recent government approval of marijuana and in hordes of young males with little loyalty beyond themselves, and in that sense he was fortunate. When the love of country and the love of God come together in the right proportions, the name for that person is a Christian citizen, and they lend great strength to our common life, as David did.

The reason I've chosen three call stories from the Gospel of Mark as my text is because a call from Jesus Christ does several things for a man. It profoundly disrupts his life. It touches something deep in his heart nothing else can touch, not even the rigors and demands of a service academy. To say Yes to the challenge of Jesus Christ is to be moved at the deepest levels of your being towards a kind of greatness that is willing to lay down your life for the good of others in a thousand small acts of service. As a bonus it gives you a whole new set of friends to shape your life and share the ups and downs that come for us all. It's called *the church*.

For whatever his faults and frailties, and they are best known to Carol and the children, Dave heard a call along the way and took up the adventure of being a follower of Jesus Christ, and every game he refereed and every stumbling Spanish speaker he coached and every engineering job he completed and every Bible study he taught and everything he did was influenced and enriched by that deep sense that he mattered enough to the Father to be called to be a companion of his beloved Son.

Jesus started with two sets of fishermen brothers and a nervous tax collector named Matthew, and somewhere along the way a young man named Dave found himself in their lively company two thousand years later. "Follow me," and along the way I will make you into fisher of men and women." And the Lord who was faithful to Dave in life was faithful to him in death. He had become what Christ promised, a humble, honest, earthy follower who influenced others.

Dave is with the Lord; heaven is his way station, not his final destination. That

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will come only at the end of the age with the great resurrection and the descent of the new heavens and the new earth to change everything forever.

We Christians who follow the Scriptures and the great Creeds believe in a two stage post-mortem reality: heaven immediately after for the faithful soul as stage 1, and ultimately the kingdom of God in a transformed creation, including new resurrection bodies as stage 2. Heaven is a pleasant layover on the way to the greater and grander goal of all creation made new as previewed for us in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. What happened to his broken, abused, dead body will happen to all that is. Life is not finally about the soul's escape to another world above; it's about God reclaiming and remaking the whole creation without sin and evil and death.<sup>1</sup> Heaven is a better place in that we Christ face to face, but it is not yet the best place, which is the creation reclaimed.

Where else could Dave be, and where else could he be headed? The Lord Jesus owned him lock, stock, and barrel. And though Jesus Christ we are still united with David in the communion of the saints. He is gone from us, but he is not far away. And so whenever you give God worship or take communion or find yourself speaking to God in prayer, know that the man you love is also nearby and that he is not ignorant of all that happens to you, and let be a great encouragement for you to also say Yes to the call and to enter in to your own unfolding adventure with a Lord who's fully alive, fully present, and still in the business of recruiting followers. It would please Dave very much.

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<sup>1</sup> For the full treatment of this classic Christian teaching, see N.T. Wright, *Surprised By Hope* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2008); it's a book I read and re-read.

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