

A Witness to the Christian Gospel at the Death of John Kundrat
Mark 8:22-9:1
Pastor Phil Thrailkill
Main Street UMC, Greenwood SC
August 16, 2013

I am a man who loves coincidences, that curious conjunction of unexpected events that makes you pause and wonder, What's going on here? Well, I had an odd one Wednesday afternoon just after my meeting with the family. As I got up to leave, Brendan- Tracy's husband- followed me out the door, and when I asked where he lived he said, "Just outside Athens?" When I followed up with, "Does it have a name?" he smiled, "We live in Between," and like a thousand before I replied, "In between what?" He smiled again, "Between is the name of our small town." "Oh, I've never heard of that one before. How small is it?" "Oh, about a hundred and fifty people." I chuckled, and we shook hands. Little did I know....

That evening a column from one of my favorite Christian bloggers, J. Lee Grady, popped into my email.¹ When I read his opening paragraph I chuckled again. Here's how it started:

"A while back I passed through the tiny community of Between, Ga. With a population of only 148, the place is not much to write home about. The name fits because it's halfway between Atlanta and Athens. But as I drove through, I couldn't help imagining the strange reactions I'd get if I lived there. "Where are you from?' someone would ask.

'I live in Between.'

'In between what?'

'In Between, Georgia.'

'In between Georgia and what?'"

He then continues with a brief reflection:

"I doubt I'll ever move to that town, but the truth is that many of us are living 'in between' because we are in a major transition. Some of us know where we're going, but we feel stuck halfway."

¹ www.charismamag.com/blogs/fire-in-my-bones/11934-dont-get-stuck-in-between.

Today we all live in Between; we dwell in the gap between life with John and life without him, and for some of you, particularly Jeff and Tracey, it's a place you've never been before because you've never known life without your father. For everyone else here today John was an interlude. You didn't know him, and then you did, and now he's gone. For some that interlude was longer than others, say with Lyn who knew John way back in high school and for whom her invitation to the Sadie Hawkins dance and his arriving late in a borrowed car shaped her life forever. So today at this graveside we begin to dwell in the Land of Between.

I first met John several months ago when his neighbors Dave and Jeannie Patterson alerted me their neighbor John was failing. I learned he was a disconnected church member with a second wife who'd died of cancer. So I went by and we sat in the garage for over an hour as John unfolded some of the story of his life. He did his best to make me feel welcome, and we talked about his Russian ancestry, his days at Penn State, and when Jeff and Tracey were coming for their next visit. I knew there was more to tell, some of the darker chapters of John's life, but none of that was for a first visit with a unknown preacher who needed to be duly impressed, or at least diverted from embarrassing inquiries. It was clear at a glance that John was not a well man, and when I learned he was only six years my senior, I wondered at the toll some of his bad habits had taken on this once athletic man. He talked about Westinghouse, about golf and hunting, about Rebecca and Jimmy who'd become his caretakers and companions. John spoke frankly about how good they were for him, and - after meeting them personally- I now see why. We read Scripture and I prayed. Then I said, "John, remember that you belong to Christ, and you belong to us."

The next time I saw John was in the hospital a week ago today, and that's where I met Jeff. I saw him again Saturday and then Sunday afternoon at Hospice, and each time we prayed. When I received the word that John had died Tuesday morning, I was surprised because he'd been so alert on Sunday.

John, you all agree, was a complex man, capable of great acts of generosity and kindness, but also of harsh words and cruelty and colossally bad judgments about relationships. Each person in our circle could tell stories of both sides of John, of how stubborn he was, how aggravating, and yet how he managed to encircle himself with friends who remained loyal. For Lyn and Jeff and Tracey, the wounds are deeper, and so they may dwell in the Land of Between much longer than the rest. Be patient. Coming to terms with the death of a father and an ex is one of life's big challenges. Sifting what's to be kept from what goes in the discard pile takes time.

Friends Tony and Dave were linked with John through hunting and shooting, and aren't we glad the DNR doesn't issue citations to dead men for shooting a turkey out of season? They saw him have a heart for people the rest of you never knew about. There's always a secret life of our parents to which we are not privy because they have a life apart from us.

Tracey relishes the memories of John's visit to Between just to be with her and help with a sick grandson, Mason. It was in those times that Tracy and John got to know each other at a new level.

On Friday when I walked in the hospital room and saw Jeff sitting attentively at his father's bedside, I sensed something, and when Jeff shared with me a bit about his dad, I understood that sometimes the biblical command to honor one's father is more difficult for some than others. That Jeff was there said a lot about his faith, and when he said, "We go to First Methodist Marietta," I knew he'd have access to the resources required for his journey through the Land of Between.

It was during the fatal illness of his second wife Patti that John met Rebecca, first through her cleaning business, then as a care-giver for his wife, and eventually for himself. Without any lessening of his affection for Tracey and Jeff, John found room for Rebecca in his heart and home. He waited up for her when she came home from an evening shift at Wal-Mart as if she was a teen out on her first date with a questionable young man. And then came Jimmy as Rebecca's sidekick and more recently her husband. They were *the odd couple plus one*, leaning on each other to make life work.

One of the gifts God gave John was Rebecca's stubborn faith in Christ. John went to church occasionally a while back, but from the testimonies of others it was clear that having a good time was the center of John's life, and it took a toll, didn't it? John was not big on what we have euphemistically have come to call *self-care*. I am thankful for reports that in his later days this stubborn, proud man let Rebecca lead him in a simple prayer of surrender to Christ. Never minimize such acts of desperation and humility since they come at such a high price for the proud and independent. Could John have been a better man with a more robust faith earlier in life? Of course. It could have saved him and his family much pain. But then that's true of all of us. But I believe John died in the faith, because that's all God requires, not anything heroic, just an admission of need and a simple act of trust in Jesus.

John died in a place of compassion, Hospice, in all the comforts medicine has to offer. He died surrounded by friends and family, visited by his pastor and prayed for by many, and in this sense it was a blessed death. That it is followed by a Christian funeral is testimony to the faithfulness of God's church, even to those who are not always faithful in their responses. God's grace is bigger than human frailty.

The Land of Between is where we now dwell, and God is his mercy is with us in this awkward, painful, and memory drenched little place off the main drag.

Today we face not only John's but our own mortality. Today we review not only John's life but our own, and if we're honest, we know we need the same mercy John did, that for Christ's sake and our trust in him, God would forgive and sustain us all our days till we die and those who surround our grave begin their days in the Land of Between. What will be said of you on that day?

In time you will find your way forward, so may the grace of God go with you and find you slipping into some pew on Sundays to check in with our good and great God who was so kind to his difficult son John.

Oh, and the next time I'm between Athens and Atlanta I intend to turn off the main road, find my way to Between, and if they have a city sign to have my picture taken. I love coincidences. They alert me to a mystery at work behind the scenes.
