

“Full Circle”
A Witness to the Christian Gospel at the Death of Julian “Sonny” Bolton Jr.
Mark 8:22-9:1
Pastor Phil Thrailkill
January 31, 2014

I did not know Mr. Julian Bolton, so I am at a disadvantage this afternoon, perhaps of all who are here the least qualified to speak of him. Our church records, which my secretary Emmie researched this morning, indicate he joined Main Street Methodist on May 10, 1942 on profession of faith and that his mother Margaret Moore Bolton was also a member. From the reports I’ve received of her overbearing nature with her only son (the constraints of which he fled as soon as possible in an act of rebellion that marked him for ever!), I surmise this event had something to do with words she may have spoken one Sunday afternoon, “Son, I think it’s time you joined the church.” So at age eleven, during the early years of World War II, Julian stood at the front of Main Street church and, among other vows, answered this one, “Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord and pledge your allegiance to his kingdom?” **“I do,”** he said. Did he fully comprehend the weight these promises carry? I doubt it, but then who does? I’m still living into their new layers of meaning. Our records do not indicate he ever transferred to another church, so I guess I’m still his pastor of record, thus the title of this message, “Full Circle.” It is a good and faithful thing that the church is here to take care of her stray and wandering sheep, even if only with the grace of a decent Christian burial.

What I know of Julian is by the second hand report of his much-younger cousin Rebecca Fouche with whom I shared a delightful conversation only yesterday. As with many visits among native South Carolinians, we soon discover many points of contact. She and my wife Lori share the same ancestral surname, the French *Fouche* Anglicized as *Furches*, that Rebecca once attended Lori’s alma mater at Salem College, that my Zeigler lawyer cousins are her Columbia friends. But when I found out she was Episcopalian and knew my friend Bishop Allison, I drew a deep breath, the reason being that we Methodists are the country cousins they are often hesitant to claim because of our enthusiastic ways and bumbling liturgy. We are- how shall we say it- a bit unrefined, though our doctrines are nearly identical because John Wesley remained a priest of the Church of England till his death. Several years ago I was invited to speak at the Mere Anglicanism conference in Charleston, and there I sat as the lone Methodist on the dais with bishops and theologians and the chaplain of Cambridge University. When it came my turn I said, “I feel like a mule at the Kentucky derby; I will not win, but the elevated company will do me good!” And so it is today.

Julian loved getting degrees and spent some time teaching economics. He had friends in Atlanta, but they were not well known to his family. When I risked the word *reclusive*, Rebecca said that was too strong and that the word *private* was more fitting. Greenwood was *the town he left behind*, but today he returns to rest with his family, here to await the resurrection of the dead at the end of the age. Our place and our raising and our family are hard to escape, and the magnetic pull of roots and place and belonging has, at his death, pulled him back to Greenwood.

Rebecca was linked to Julian through visits to a college roommate in Atlanta. and in the last year, particularly since last summer, has increased her contacts and help because of his growing infirmities. Only a month ago she was with him, and despite episodes of dementia, shared some delightful conversations about the family, its oddities and eccentricities. Wouldn't you love to have a secret recording of what was said? That, against his independent character, he called last summer for help is a tribute to the trust he had in her love for him and in her business skills. To become someone's confidant is a deep trust, fiduciary and otherwise. Rebecca is especially thankful for his Philippino caretaker Laila who had a gift for making him happy when there was not much to be happy about. And when she spoke of *integrity* as his chief virtue, Rebecca added a hand gesture to show how much she admired it. She also mentioned his generosity, but with the obligations of confidentiality omitted the details with a wink and a smile. He was a classy dresser with a wicked sense of humor. I was also warned that he wanted no B.S. at his funeral, though I doubt he used the abbreviation when he told Rebecca.

You are here today because you shared a link with Julian, *Sonny* to many of you, be it family or friendship. An only child who never married and whose early girlfriends were, I am told, not approved by his mother. His life, and much of it is hidden, is now in the merciful hands of God who sent Jesus into the world to be the friend of sinners like us. But to those who remain, and whose fates are not yet fixed, the question of Sunday, May 10, 1942 remains an open one, "Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord and pledge your allegiance to his kingdom?"

I do, and I hope you do as well, so that when you come *full circle* there will be someone, even Jesus Christ, to welcome you into the world that is to come. And I hope this Sunday, or one soon thereafter, finds you humbling yourself, entering a church, opening your hymnal to sing the songs and prayer the prayers and draw deeply on the mercies of God and the fellowship of other followers of Jesus. Being here today could be a turning point in your life. Don't miss out on God's grace.
