

"Rooted and Grounded in Love"
Psalm 139; Eph. 3:16-19
Service for J. D. Stahl
July 19, 2010

Of all of us here today I am perhaps least qualified to celebrate J.D.'s life. We had our first real conversation in June at a noisy table in the Fellowship Hall. Physically, he looked to me like a man in prison, obviously ill, and yet also obviously coping well. There in the middle of that busy room surrounded by bustle and noise, his gaze was steady, his eyes remarkably engaging, his conversation delightful. I asked the kinds of questions you ask upon meeting someone, and then we talked about children's literature and Mark Twain's home in Elmira, since I had just moved from New York. I will always be glad that on another visit with him in the hospital we talked about a collection of Czechoslovakian Fairy tales that had been my mother's as a child. We agreed that that soft rags pages of old books smell wonderful, and I shared a favorite tale from that book that he had never heard. I promised to bring it to show him once the boxes were unpacked at our new house. Despite being unwell he was clearly interested. The very next day, however, it was apparent that he was not improving and, and even more importantly, that he had made the inner decision to move on.

Our time that next morning was a cogent goodbye. He said he was sorry that we had not had much time together. It was as elegant a leaving taking as I have ever witnessed. The apostle Paul is another man who spent time in prison and was ultimately unable to be freed in this life. Yet he, too, managed to be fully aware and engaged in the world. He wrote to churches he had founded and exhorted them to be faithful, courageous, and most of all to live joyfully and without fear in a world transformed by the reality of Christ crucified and risen.

The words Hans read for us may not have been written by Paul himself, but they are exactly the kind of exultant prayer that Paul prayed for the churches he loved. The true measure of reality, says the prayer, will never be found in knowledge, information or "smarts." The world is bounded in every dimension by God's inscrutable and unfailing love, and the way to enter that realm, says Paul, is to know Christ. Because the language of the prayer is dense and philosophical scholars have debated whether Paul intended to refer to some wider philosophical discourse of his day. But reading the prayer as a pastor on a day like today, that discussion seems silly. Paul the pastor is trying to encourage his church and is reaching for words to talk about mysteries that can't really be touched by words. The word "you" in the prayer is always plural. The whole community is being addressed, and while it is true that individuals in the church are the ones who must appropriate the gifts of strength, power and love in their daily—and sometimes achingly private—lives, ultimately the fullness of God can only be known by how we as church act together. Love is a shared experienced, lived in relationships each day with each other and

with the earth. All of the writings JD picked to share with us today affirm how deeply he believed that to be true.

From what I have learned in the past few days the thing I want to celebrate most about JD is the impact he had on the communities he engaged: the community of students through the years, his colleagues in the departments where he served and in the field of children's literature, the friends he had breakfast with regularly, and this church being only some of the communities that brightened around him. J.D. was well aware of the power of connection with others, and God's presence there. He wrote as much in his reflections on the character named Ben in a book by David Guterson.* These are J.D.'s words:

I do not feel myself to be as alone as Ben does. I have family and friends and community who sustain me and with whom I can share my grief, anxiety, and fear as well as my joys and hopes. I also feel sustained (not always, but enough to make a profound difference) by awareness of the presence of God. I am only one small consciousness in a universe of many, surrounded and permeated by the Ultimate Reality. I feel myself to be part of the continuity of the human race: as a child of my parents and member of my extended family, as brother, son, husband, father, cousin, uncle, nephew, grandson, and not least of all, friend. I am part of the human community, not just an isolated consciousness.

Though dealing with illness and dying brings with it fear, uncertainty, and pain, I believe that love and beauty and goodness are lasting realities, I don't believe that love or beauty or goodness is wasted or lost. Perhaps the most important lesson of this book for me is to seek always to live fully, rightly, humbly in the present moment, which I believe is, in one sense, truly the Eternal Moment.

In JD's hospital room the last time I was with him when he could still speak, he took my hand and held it tightly. He spoke his apology that our friendship would be so short and then he told me, very plainly, that he was ready to die. I have been at many bedsides and seldom have I seen the peace and readiness I saw in JD. He told me he had been thinking of those who had gone before him, that he had had a good life, and that he knew there was nothing to fear. He had worried in recent years about the political universe the boys would inherit, but he was less concerned about that now. His only real sorrow, he said, was the suffering that his death would bring to Sarah and the boys. As he said this luminous eyes filled with tears but his voice was strong. He told me had tried to prepare for the boys' education. He knew, he said, that there were many dear friends who would do what they could to help. Then he asked me, please, to take care of them.

It is a strange thing to have the authority by virtue of one's position to make a corporate promise. JD was not speaking to me as he held my hand so tightly; he was speaking to you, his church. On your behalf I said yes. "Yes, we will do all we can." So it is done. We who proclaim the fullness of God in this room and beyond our doors, we who try to be rooted and ground in love have promised, and today I invite you as we celebrate JD before God, to make that promise your own.

JD knew that God has no boundaries so I also invite everyone witnessing this moment of thanksgiving for JD's life to join that promise of care for those he loved. If we listened well to the prayer Hans read, we will know we are not taking on any kind of burden. We are being offered a gift, the gift of steeping further into the intimate realm of God's care for the earth, for JD, and for us all. AMEN.

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* *East of the Mountains* by David Guterson, about a retired man with terminal cancer?