

***Celebration of the Life of
John Nelson Stewart, III***

July 12, 2008

I.

Many occasions in life draw us together. Sometimes we gather in joy and happiness, and sometimes in sorrow and grief. Today we're here for both reasons. We're united in sorrow because of the death of our friend and brother, Johnny. But we're also here to remember and celebrate his life.

And to Sue, and all the members of the family who loved him so much, we want you all to know that our prayers are with you and our hearts go out to you. Johnny was a fine Christian man, a loving husband, a caring father, a proud grandfather, and a true friend. His passing leaves a large empty space in many lives.

So we sit here today with two kinds of emotions. One is profound sadness because Johnny no longer is with us. But the other is joyful hope because we know he has claimed the promise of eternal life. And in that context I would like us to think about how the Lord touched Johnny, and how Johnny in turn touched us. And after I finish, some of Johnny's grandchildren would like to come forward and share their remembrances of him.

II.

We might begin by recognizing that our passage through this world is relatively brief when we consider the countless generations that have gone before. In the Book of James, for example, our Lord's brother said that we "are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes" (4:14). The world endures, but we do not.

Even so, we still live, as Johnny did, to make the world a better place and to leave something behind for those who follow. But we know that this world is not really our home because our lives here merely prepare us for the greater life to come. We just heard some selections from Scripture that proclaimed this Christian promise.

The reading from Isaiah foretold the messiah who would bring everlasting joy. The twenty third psalm is a lyrical statement of God's promise that we "will dwell in the house of the Lord, forever." From Revelation we heard that in the last day there will be no more death, and everything will be made new. And the Gospel of John told us how Jesus is preparing a place for us in heaven.

So, while in this earthly life we all experience physical death, it really has no power over us. Death cannot hurt us because we merely leave this world for the greater glory of eternity. Death is not the closing of a door, but rather the opening of the heavenly gate. It's the beginning of the greatest and most wonderful adventure of all, actually returning to God.

III.

But even though we know Johnny is with our Lord, we still grieve at times like this. We feel a loss because he no longer is with us. We miss him. We wish we could say thank you one more time for the joy he brought to our lives. Johnny lit up our lives when he was here, and now that he is gone our memories of him seem to shine even brighter in our hearts.

I did not have the privilege of knowing Johnny as long as many of you. But I really didn't have to know him very long to realize that he was an exceptional person. He was a man of principle, which was evident from his professional life and devotion to civic duty. He was a man of courage, which we all saw in the grace and humor with which he dealt with the

blessings and difficulties in his life. And perhaps, most importantly, he was a man forever marked in our memories by the love and respect he generated in others, especially his family.

As I sat in the hospital last Thursday during Johnny's final hours, I remembered the movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*, which was made way back in 1946 by Frank Capra, and which still is shown during the Christmas season. It starred Jimmy Stewart as George Bailey, a man who wondered, as we all do from time to time, about our purpose on this earth. And toward the end of the movie God sent a guardian angel to show him what his town and the people in it would have been like if he had not been born. And in example after example he saw how he had made a difference to so many other people, how he had enriched their lives, and how he was truly loved.

You could make the same kind of movie about Johnny. He enriched our lives and brought out the best in us. We could point to many things to demonstrate that, but for me one of the most compelling was his hospital room during that final illness. It was filled by children and grandchildren and in-laws whose lives were shaped and blessed by Johnny's own outlook on life and the joy with which he expressed it.

I heard his children tell him they could not have had a better father. I listened as his grandchildren told funny stories about him, and it was clear that those stories were offered in admiration and reverence. And of course, I saw his dear wife Sue, as I had seen her so many times before, always by his side, giving back to him the love that he gave in such full measure to her.

I also recalled a few of my conversations with Johnny about his faith, and some of his comments on my sermons. He was a serious listener and frequently asked penetrating questions. On a couple occasions I even used his expressions in my later sermons. It was clear that God's love was a central part of his own life, and it was equally clear that his faith in our Lord and Savior was alive and strong.

To use a sports analogy, I could say that from the moment we are born we are called to run the race of life. The Bible urges us to run that race with perseverance (Heb. 12:1).

And it's a race where there is no finish line, not in this world at least. Certainly the starting blocks are in this world, and the track is in this world, and we all know that the high hurdles that we must overcome are in this world. But the finish line is in the next world. And when we do reach that line we receive the crown of glory given to those who kept the faith. Johnny faithfully ran the race, and now he wears that glorious crown.

And so, when all is said and done, a good measure of peoples' lives is what they left behind and how they are remembered. Johnny will be laid to rest today, but he will be remembered always for his friendship, for the way he put others ahead of himself, for the gentle dignity that radiated from him, and for the Christian example that he set.

IV.

We share our tears at parting from Johnny, but we also look forward to the joy of meeting him again. And for Sue and the family, and for all of his friends here today, and for the people of St. Thomas, I pray that your sorrow, and our sorrow, soon can give way to thanksgiving for the wonderful times we all had with him.

So, we grieve, but we grieve with hope. And with hope the grief we feel today will diminish and be replaced by the comfort of knowing that Johnny is safe with our Lord, and that he is waiting there for us. *Amen.*