

Opening Words

Reverend Greg Ledbetter

Shell Ridge Community Church, Walnut Creek, California

Twice, now, in the past three years, I have stood at the foot of the bed of men I have loved and appreciated and lost. And I have held their feet, their bare feet... and I have wrestled with the meaning of death and loss... their deaths and my loss... their deaths and OUR loss.

There is something profoundly cleansing and purifying about facing honestly the limits of life, including our own mortality and the mortality of those we love. And there is a way in which that honest grappling with these liminal events creates openings within us. Openings for a new appreciation of life while we have it. Openings for deepened love for those who still surround us. Openings for a re-animating spirit that offers healing and new hope. Openings for re-welcoming God -- God who is love, God who is life -- welcoming God back into our personal world and the public world where we live.

On Tuesday, April 4th, Nancy Smith and I gathered with most of the immediate family of our dear friend, Ray Jennings. Ray had died in the wee hours of that morning and now lay quietly as though sleeping on his deathbed in his bedroom, covered-up to his shoulders-by a blanket that was inscribed with the so very familiar words of the Lord's prayer. We gathered around Ray in the shadowed light of that room and, far from shying away from death and Ray's body, we stood near. We took water from the river where Ray's Lord had been baptized and we anointed Ray... first his feet that Ray had himself dipped into the Jordan some years ago... and then his forehead, consciously mingled with the tears of our loss, I inscribed a cross, a cross of both sorrow and hope, a cross that not only spoke of our grieving, but also a cross that spoke of our deepest hope that the love that bound us in life was a love that could never die... would never die... will never die.

I want to welcome you into this time of celebrating and remembering the life and the ministry of our dear brother, Ray Jennings. This is a high and sacred and holy time, this is a time of painful privilege. Who among us ever wishes to lose one whom we have loved, yet we also acknowledge their life as gift -- a gift whose worth is even greater than the pain of loss. And so we gather to thank God for the gift of Raymond Polson Jennings, husband and father, simple man and minister of God.

Let me say, finally, that the spirit of Ray will be brooding over this event. Should we, in the next hour -- speakers take note -- should we become too ponderous, too maudlin, too self-absorbed, too glib, watch for Ray's familiar cane to begin to quiver and vibrate. Let us remember that though Ray's body is gone, Ray's spirit is very much alive.

Closing Thoughts

Well, how did we do? Did we become too ponderous, too maudlin, too self-absorbed, too glib? What does the clock say? Well, just Ray can't blame any excessiveness on us; I think we should let him have the last word as we finish saying our goodbyes.

Ray's 1989 Epitaph:

Dig me no grave;
Build me no ornate crypt;
Mingle my ashes with earth;
Fling them to the winds I have flown
 To far flung places on this globe;
 All "home" to me.

Sing me no dirge;
Craft no glib obituary;
Remind those who have loved me
Of the themes that moved my life;
 Love of church, a world at peace,
 The oneness of humanity;
 A few choice friends, family ties;
 Integrity.

Shed me no tears;
Squander no time in mourning;
Rejoice in my translation;
Celebrate my now-found freedom;
 Free from all past limitation;
 Free to travel without luggage;
 Free from hellos or goodbyes;
 Free to write sans editors;
 Free to sing, off key or not;
 At home with God.

When mortal life has left this flesh,
I'll revel in eternal life;
I'll know as I've been known;
See what long I have but visioned
 I'll work and not grow weary,
 No day, no night, no deadlines;
 I'll travel unencumbered;
 Write and sing without reserve,
 My Lord alone to satisfy;

My Lord, my judge.

Finally, on November 27th at First Baptist Oakland and again on January 8th here at Shell Ridge, Ray preached his final two sermons. The occasions were precious gifts to those of us who were privileged to be present.

Ray took as his text for those sermons a passage from Acts 13, focusing especially on Acts 13:36. “For David, after he had in his own generation served the counsel of God, fell asleep, and was laid unto his fathers and saw corruption.”

Here’s how Ray summarized it. “David served the will of God. David served his own generation. David died and was buried. Not so with Jesus who was raised from death.” Ray then said that he hoped what was said of David could be said of him. So let us say it for Ray and let us together affirm: Ray served the will of God. Ray served his own generation. Ray has died and Ray lives in the eternal embrace of the God who created him, the God who loved him, the God who called him and the God who has welcomed Ray back into the heart of God’s own being.”

I want to believe that as Ray settled into that mystery that is beyond this life, he died with these words from Timothy whispering within his soul: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”