

Funeral for Warren K. Okeson December 27, 2021

Genesis 1:1-4a; 31-2:3

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. ³Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good... ³¹God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. (2.1) Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. ²And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. ³So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

Luke 5:17-26

One day, while he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting near by (they had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem); and the power of the Lord was with him to heal. Just then some men came, carrying a paralyzed man on a bed. They were trying to bring him in and lay him before Jesus; *but finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus. When he saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you."* Then the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, "Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" When Jesus perceived their questionings, he answered them, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Stand up and walk'? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" —he said to the one who was paralyzed, *"I say to you, stand up and take your bed and go to your home."* Immediately he stood up before them, took what he had been lying on, and went to his home, glorifying God. Amazement seized all of them, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, "We have seen strange things today."

Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Warren Okeson was a creator. He was a man of the soil and the plains, with deep roots in the heart of this country. So, I wanted to start by reminding us all that the God that created Warren in his image has journeyed with him ever since. It is this God that Warren came to know so well that he made his whole life a tribute - to the Creator, the craftsman, the idea man, the host, the lover, the father, the artist. These aspects of God were the ones that Warren reflected with his very breath - so naturally, so organically - with a sort of goofy smile that put you at ease even when Warren himself wasn't.

As the musical *Hamilton* ends, his wife reflects on one eternal fact: *We are not in control of "who lives, who dies, who tells our story."* Warren really didn't need to worry about that, because anyone who ever knew him holds their personal piece of his story to share with the whole. And how remarkable that, to a person, the pieces of the story you share about Warren are in almost perfect unison. Warren was a man of many talents who experienced much in this life. But the essence of his life - his personal portfolio (so to speak) - was lived out through the love and relationships he shared with the people in this room, either physically or virtually. I'd like to share a few snapshots of the tributes that appeared on social media as he was going home ...

Rachel Seppie -- I may have never met a more selfless person. He is the type of person you feel blessed to know, who makes you feel like instant family. He is my father in law's best friend in the world... someone I have heard a thousand tall tales about...who will probably never know the amount of lives he has touched on this earth. He is a special needs grandpa (one of the best), and he is someone who has given me strength. *Nikki Barrett* -- Grandpa was one of a kind. This man fought with broad shoulders, bright eyes, and a massive smile for as long as he could. The leukemia could not take who he is as a human. Until his last breath, Warren Okeson was an absolute hero. He was a marine, a volunteer, and simply a giver of himself. I never heard this man say an unkind thing about anyone. He was gentle, but so strong. He was kind, but so firm in his beliefs, and his love for his people. **He could fix anything.** Anything. He was open-minded, generous, and so darn reliable. He loved unconditionally, without question.

Why is it that some give of themselves so easily while so many others do not? Two quick stories about what God and Warren had going on with each other through the Living Word of Holy Scripture, for Warren's engineering mind was always seeking information, even as his heart was also yearning to be held. I remember sitting in Bible study with him the first time we read the story of Jesus healing of the paralytic - the one where a bunch of friends punch a hole in the roof of the house where Jesus is teaching to gain access. "...but finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles - into the middle of the crowd - in front of Jesus. When Jesus saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you." Warren loved that story, because Jesus forgave the man before he told him to get up and walk. Warren saw **the restoration** - the fixing - of the man's whole soul and body, and would use that lens in the future - seeing all of Jesus' miracles as forgiveness as healing.

I often wondered if he was experiencing his own forgiveness each time we visited that story. But then we all saw Warren as one among the friends who brought this man to Jesus to be forgiven and healed. It was their faith, their action, their hope that helped it happen. How many times had Warren been that friend for someone? For you?

Then, reading through the Gospel of John, we came upon the line - "*unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit*" - Warren pointed out that seeds do not actually **die** to produce fruit. Now, every time I read that passage I think of him...because that is where I learned the phrase, "*Death is not death to God - it's the stuff of new life.*" New Life. Resurrected Life. Life anew with the communion of saints for all eternity, where we will be with him again.

Warren believed in forgiveness and new life. So we began this service with the Thanksgiving for Baptism. Because Warren's first new life began in those waters - where *our gracious heavenly Father frees us from sin and death by joining us to the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ*. The single grain of wheat that was Warren Okeson gave up his own life every day for others - in a sense, dying to himself - and thus his life will continue to bear much fruit in all of us. *We love, because God first loved us*. That was so true of Warren.

In Marilynne Robinson's book, *Gilead*, the main character, preacher John Ames observes, "*It has seemed to me sometimes as though the Lord breathes on this poor gray ember of Creation and it turns to radiance - for a moment or a year or the span of a life; Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine (like transfiguration.)*"

Warren would never have described himself as a radiant light from God. He kept to himself, perhaps out of his deepest desire to be invisible. Not in a bad way, but in the very best way. He did not want praise; he did not want to stand out; he just wanted to be there to take care of people and things and dreams and visions. He was one of those men who just wanted to make a difference wherever and with whomever he went...In fact, one of his many friends posted this quote that seems to fit Warren's life as "a grain of wheat." *The purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to be useful, to be compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well.* - Ralph Waldo Emerson.

In a few moments we will "commend" him to God. Funny word, "commend" because it really means, "let go and let God." The fabric of our community has been torn some and needs to be repaired right now, and we are called to do that mending together with God - co-mending as it were - placing patches where needed to make our fabric even stronger, and Warren will be part of that in a beautiful and creative way.

Sometimes life in this world can be unpredictable, or untimely, or downright cruel. But as we walk from day to day and gather together with friends and family to share a meal and tell the stories of those who loved us and whom we love, we are reminded that we are not just tellers of the tales, but pieces of God's great story of love. The one in which we get to gather and share at God's table, in God's house, as beloved children, invited to come and see - and to stay as long as we like - to eat and drink and tell the story, with Emmanuel, God with us, as our host.

So let us live as Warren lived - embodying these words from Jesus: *Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who let go of their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.* Well done, good and faithful servant. Amen.

Sing "He Leadeth Me" on the insert in your bulletin. This was one of Warren's guiding hymns.