

“A Celebration of Grace in the Life of Norman Charles Burke”
Saturday, October 16, 2021- 11:00 a.m.
Advent Lutheran Church, Olathe, KS

Genesis 2:4b-8 In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground—then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed.

Psalm 23 (read in unison)

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want;
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I fear no evil; for thou art with me;
thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
You anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life;
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Luke 13:6-9

Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, ‘See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?’ He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

Grace and peace to you from God, the Creator, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Norman Charles Burke was a man with a huge heart, one which powered his body and his soul for 71 years as he loved large among us. And while it is not a stretch to say he was loved by everyone around him, it was the suddenness of the end of his life that is still challenging each of us to adapt to the reality that his huge heart simply stopped. It makes no sense - he had done everything he could to keep it healthy and strong, and yet after one heroic push, his big heart just wore out. But, my oh my, he certainly used it well.

Norm was born into a large family in small town America. It would have been easy for him to fade into the crowd of seven brothers and a sister, but his stature and his attitude about life made him stand out. He was a simple guy - down to earth - who lived on the basic values of a solid family and a personal faith.

There were days when life wasn’t easy within such a large clan, but Norm learned early that the one thing that was most important in his life was family. And that never, ever changed. So when the new girl in town came down the street with her sister, he liked what he saw right away. Now, he was a Senior and Jackie was a Sophomore in high school - so he had to be patient until she was old enough for a “real date” not just meeting “by accident” at the movies in town. But once she was old enough they never had another “first kiss” with anyone else. Jackie says that Norm always knew a good thing when he saw it.

Norm enjoyed bringing folks into his circle of fun - mentoring a variety of friends and workers - sharing what he knew and investing in people and whatever relationships they offered. But he liked it best when those he took time with gave back with some effort.

He wasn't into impressing folks - he and Jackie didn't care where they lived as long as they had each other - and he rarely wore anything that wasn't casual. He wasn't into "fancy," and when visiting Amber (a great cook) he would always warn her, "no foo foo." She learned quickly not to put fruit on meat - or get too exotic with what was on the plate. (Even though he appreciated great food, decorations, accommodations - what was important was the people, the family and friends and the time together.)

Traci told me he handled everything with humor and even when it came time to make his arrangements, all three of his women knew the answer to what he wanted for his final send-off. For years they had heard his silly, but real desire: "Just put me in a cardboard box." He lived by the saying, "be happy in the moment" - never allowing embarrassment or disappointment or failure to dim a relationship. Norm trained 'em up to stand up, and everyone learned by watching his life's example.

With no frills and few resources, Norm made his fortune, driven to provide for his family, and learning to invest outside of himself. He was a delivery truck driver, then a salesman who became an owner of the company. He was a creative force in the workplace and he had a particular knack for the challenges of developing businesses and people. And he was great at it.

The readings from the Bible for today were chosen to reflect Norm's approach to life: the first lesson is part of the story of Creation from Genesis - where God has called forth the earth and heavens, rain and fertile fields. Then, wanting to make all of this better, God made humans who could till and weed this garden and coax it to bring forth fruit. The Creator creates other creators, who learn to bring something out of nothing - or very little!

The Gospel lesson is from Luke - about a fig tree that was not doing what it was supposed to do - to bear figs! Whereas some would become angry with this useless little tree (like the landowner who was ready to give up on it completely and cut it down instead of wasting the space) the gardener prevailed upon him and said "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it." And that is the clearest picture I have of who Norm was at his core: Norm was a creator - and Norm was a developer - of land, of projects and of people. He loved the challenges of putting together all the puzzle pieces, and making things better than they were when he found them.

Norm was a man of passion and good humor at all the stages of his life. He was practical joker who made folks laugh, and for years he would amuse Traci and Amber by hiding a stuffed "Dopey" (of the Seven Dwarves) character in unexpected places. Sort of like he was the "one-of-seven brothers" who would find surprising places to turn up - with an endearing and loving presence that could just make your whole day better. And I would bet that those unexpected visits where you (find him present) will continue - just not in the ways that you might think.

So now we find ourselves here to love him on his way. The man who never needed an intercessor but would go to the source directly, Norm believed in the God of Creation, the God of endless chances to make things better, and the God who draws us all together in love. Because not only did Norm believe in God - God believed in Norm. And even as we gather here to share our shock, our sorrow and our grieving, Norm is among his heavenly family - all those from generations who he loved and lost. And you can bet that he will be there when we are reunited with him and the whole company of the saints in light.

Rest in peace, Norm. Thank you for your time. Thank you for your love. We know we will see you again, through the grace of our heavenly Father. Meantime, we will follow your example of enjoying life simply and passionately - living each day from sunrise to sunset - leaving things better than you found them. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Pastor Susan Langhauser
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