

**Celebration of Grace**  
**Joseph "Joe" Burton North**  
**September 20, 2021**

**Isaiah 41:9-10**

...you whom I took from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, "You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off" ...do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.

**I Thessalonians 4:13-17**

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.

**Matthew 11:28-30**

Jesus said, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

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

Everybody loved Joe. And so, it can be incredibly difficult to say goodbye to someone so special. Sometimes life allows those who were so very loved to linger – allowing each of us to say goodbye just a little bit at a time. But you all did not know that these past few weeks was your time to prepare. One minute Joe was an amazing 92-year-old man who was doing pretty well, and then he was gone. Thus, you find yourselves not having had a real chance to steel yourselves, really, before you have to say goodbye.

But today we have come to be together and do what Joe did his whole life – to respond to something challenging, even frightening, differently than the way you thought you might react - because today you will begin to reclaim Joe's living memory in and among you. For this is the time to begin to remember him however he was most special, most personal to each of you. You will soon forget these last days – and return fully to sharing the treasured stories of a relationship with someone who has always been there. And the Joe that you remember will be the best parts of him, because it will be through your eyes, the eyes of love.

Everybody loved Joe. "We just *love* him!" was the reaction many people had after spending just a little bit of time with him. He had that effect on a lot of folks, for he was one of the Greatest Generation - the group of men who grew up in a different world than ours - a world we look back upon as peaceful and rooted - but a world that called up their young into battle. Joe answered that call during the Korea Conflict, but always felt like that service was diminished when compared to the Great War. That is, until he went on an honor flight to Washington, D.C. with other war veterans, and discovered that within the band of brothers, there is no comparing which calls were answered - there was only the fact that Joe had served with honor and dignity.

Joseph Burton North was a man for all seasons. Like a good many of the men of his generation, Joe was raised in the faith, baptized and confirmed. He played sports well beyond school, remaining active throughout his whole life. He was a born teacher - always asking questions, wanting to know something new and then sharing every bit of his knowledge to his girls, his friends, his fellow churchgoers and his

clients. He taught his daughters the rules of ball games (which was very impressive knowledge when they began dating!) He shared his experience and made sure that everyone in the family understood the difference between a sink and a lavatory (here's a hint: a sink is in the kitchen...) He drove a lot for his work, and so it was not surprising that his whole family learned how to navigate by landmarks rather than maps.

Perhaps because of his service to our country, he treasured his family more than things, and because he learned early about honor and sacrifice, he mostly did what was expected of him. Did I mention that everyone loved Joe? Because he was a thoroughly good man - father, grand- and great-grandfather, husband, teammate, brother, uncle, churchman, companion and friend. He never met a "stranger" for he was a born greeter, a salesman by trade, a man who listened when folks talked so that he could then develop that information into a relationship - whether it be a sale, a welcome, a funny story or a teasing the kiddos with a game of "Grandpa wins," Joe was always touching people where they lived. He was an amazing caregiver throughout his life, but he rarely shared deeply - somehow embodying the generation who dispensed their good will freely, but just didn't feel the need to "go deep" about themselves. It was sufficient for Joe to always carry out his mother's favorite advice: "Don't talk bad about anyone. Always be kind."

I have discovered over the years that a life well-lived often has a root story. It might be a character from a book or the Bible that children model themselves after. Or perhaps there was a day when their young lives were shaped, if not completely changed, by some everyday experience that just planted itself in young, fertile soil.

While sitting with Joe's daughters the other day, they all recalled just such a story about a young Joe and his father. I want to share it with you today, and if I don't quite do it justice, please ask Susan, Linda or Laura to tell it with all its details. Apparently, as a youngster (probably in early teenage years) Joe had the audacity to sass his father. He immediately knew in his bones that you don't talk back to your dad, and he took off running down the street. His dad took off after him, and because he was older, wiser, and had a pass for the streetcar, Joe's dad hopped on the trolley, passing the running Joe, and finally jumping off so that he was directly blocking the path of the terrified teen who was facing certain death at the hands of his father who had chased him down and trapped him in the street. But Joe's dad was so tickled with his ingenuous plan, that he couldn't contain his gleeful expression, and the inevitable encounter with his sassy son ended quite differently than Joe was probably expecting.

Perhaps that was the event that gave Joe what seemed to be his outlook on the rest of his life. No matter what terrors he faced, no matter how challenging his life became, no matter what curveballs life threw at him, Joe squared up and stood up and found the positive possibilities in both the ups and downs, the fears and joys that he would experience as his life unfolded.

Everybody loved Joe. And even though it might be difficult to find some quirks or failures or darkness in him that we can all relate to and smile about, what I will remind you today is that God knew his humanity. God knew Joe's foibles and sins and the shadows in his life, and God loved Joe in spite of it all. Joe loved, because God loved him first. Joe may not have chosen to go deep, but he most certainly went wide. He loved all of you. And now he knows the source of all that love, as he is reunited with - those who welcomed him home into the family of his heavenly father. Today, remember the words of Jesus: *"Come to me, all you that are weary... (for) my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."* Somehow Joe knew that; so his life touched the rest of us, making our burdens light as well. Be at peace, faithful and beloved servant. Thanks be to God for you. Amen.

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