

Northside Presbyterian Church
Chattanooga, Tennessee

“Homecoming”

John 14:1-6, 25-27; Revelation 21:1-5

Sermon preached by Rev. Joe B. Martin, IV on July 16, 2006

Over the years, you have been forced to listen to far too many stories about my family. It is because those are the stories I have. I have stories about you, too, but rarely is my family present to defend themselves. And so I hope you will indulge me one more time (at least) as I talk a bit about my father in what I recognize is only in small part sermon and probably in greater part self-therapy.

Joseph Bacon Martin, III was born in Winnsboro, South Carolina to the Rev. Arthur and Mary Martin previously of Savannah, Georgia. They moved to Columbia when he was in Junior High School and when it was time for college he went to Davidson in North Carolina. From there, he moved on to graduate school at the University of Minnesota. His good reason for journeying so far from home was that he was disappointed in the southern Presbyterian Church’s lukewarm stance on Civil Rights issues and he needed to get away from the south and view it from the outside, Minneapolis was the most remote part of the earth he could think of. His better reason to go to Minnesota was women of Scandinavian descent. There he met Mom.

Two years later, they took their Master’s degrees to a lovely little town called Chattanooga, Tennessee, where Dad taught English at Baylor and Mom first grade at Lookout Mountain Elementary for two years. Then it was off to Durham, N.C. where Dad got his Ph.D. in medieval English and more importantly, where I was born and most importantly, where I attended my first Duke basketball game at age 3 months.

Then it was off to New Jersey for a couple of years before heading back to North Carolina, this time Charlotte, where Dad’s Ph.D. in medieval English arrived at its natural occupational destination of an executive position at a bank.

Hiring Dad worked out well for North Carolina National Bank. He was part of the team that orchestrated numerable mergers so that they had to change the name to NationsBank. Dad was actually the one who came up with the name. But working for the bank worked out well for Dad, too, as he now had great resources to use in what became his ministry. He discovered that he could use the bank’s money to rebuild rundown sections of town and he instituted programs for low interest loans to small businesses in impoverished parts of the city. Under his influence, NationsBank became a national leader in minority hiring practices and a community leader in funding the arts and enrichment programs for children. Rarely was Dad the one out front, but he was always pushing from behind. His CEO called him the conscience of the bank.

However, things changed for Dad 12 years ago, just before NationsBank bought out Bank of America, kept that name, and became the largest bank in the country. He was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, a disease that attacks the central nervous system and paralyzes the body’s muscles one by one. The neurologist gave him 18 months to live. The news was devastating to Dad and to all of us, but Dad always had a way of noticing opportunity where others might miss it.

Whereas he was accustomed to getting his word out to the world through speeches he wrote for his CEO or for his brother, the governor of North Carolina, now people were listening to him. His wheelchair became a pulpit from which he preached about racial unity and tolerance, faith and fairness, helping and hoping. He did not believe that God sent this disease to him, but he did believe that God had a purpose for him and that the while the disease made some things more difficult, it could not thwart God’s will for him. He had seen many positive changes in Charlotte and had a hand in many, but there was still much to do and like the prophets of old he never held back his tongue, even when he could no longer use it to speak. The County Commission and the School Board shook whenever Dad rolled in. One Charlotte poet wrote some verse about Dad a few years ago with a line about him doing battle against “the dragons of ignorance and hate.”

He won some of those battles and lost some, but on Saturday, July 1, he lost his battle with ALS, or maybe he finally won it. That Friday night was Mom’s one night of the week on duty, which usually means little sleep. This time it meant no sleep. No matter how she arranged Dad, he could not be comfortable and they spent the whole night communicating through his letter board. This is how Dad talked to us. We held a transparent sheet of Plexiglas in front of his face and he looked at one of the letters printed on it until we lined it up and spoke the letter. Raised eyebrows from him meant we got it. A shake of the eyeballs meant, “Guess again.” It was not always easy. Unfortunately for the translator, with that Ph.D. in English, Dad never abandoned his extensive vocabulary, nor did the slowness of the process ever keep him from continuing to lecture his children at length. But that night, he was having a hard time focusing and Mom was having a difficult time with simple messages like “Move arm left” and “Warm towel on face.” He also began to get very agitated, but this was not uncommon the last couple of years, and he kept asking when his assistant, Rusty, was arriving. Mom had no idea that he was dying. Just before dawn, Dad started to spell something, but his eyes were too tired. A-C-E? You want your ace bandage adjusted? No. E-C-E? No. “Something in front of it?” Mom asked. S? N? “I just can’t get it, Joe.”

But then Rusty arrived and before he came into the room, Mom briefed him on their rough night and went to a guest room to get some sleep. But before she even made it to the room, Rusty was shouting that Dad was not responding. CPR from Rusty, an ambulance, and a rushed trip to the hospital could not get his heart beating again.

On July 5, 1000 people showed up for his funeral at our home church in Charlotte, and once again his name was in the newspaper every day as we remembered all of the work he did to make Charlotte more like the world God wants us to live in.

And so on an oppressively hot July 6, we buried my father (according to his wishes, but against all reason) in Savannah, Georgia, a place where Dad had never lived. But I guess that it was a homecoming of sorts: buried with his parents - in the midst of

all of the history of that region he had spent decades studying – not far from his ancestral Presbyterian roots in Flemington, Georgia and his Puritan roots for which he was so fond in Midway, Georgia. So it was something of a homecoming.

And death itself is a homecoming. In the second chapter of Genesis we have the depiction of creation in which God gathers up *adamah*, earth, and forms from it *adam*, Adam, God's earth creature. Then in the next chapter God tells *adam*, "from dust you were formed and to dust you shall return."

However, the homecoming is not just material, for the faithful it is a spiritual homecoming, too. According to John's Gospel, Jesus told his disciples, "In my Father's house there are many..." Well, at Bob Clarke's mother's memorial service here we heard Rev. Hallie Warren tell us that some translations say "In my Father's house there are many mansions." That does not sound very homey to me and neither Rev. Warren nor I could figure out how you can fit a bunch of mansions into a house, but God can do whatever God wants to do. Other translations say, "In my Father's house there are many rooms." Rev. Warren thought that sounds a little like Motel 6 and "We'll leave the light on for ya." No, I like the New Revised Standard Version's rendering of the Greek – because I am Presbyterian and because my Dad told me to. It renders the Greek, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places." I think that gets at the real meaning of the text. We go to live with God, to dwell with God. We are not to be guests, but citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven. We go home – to a place where we have not yet lived.

I have to admit that I do not know just what that looks like. Most people seem to think that it will be like some great and heavenly family reunion. Dad would like that and I *guess* that will be O.K. with me, but you don't know my family! However, I am descended from the Renaissance philosopher, Sir Francis Bacon; Robert the Bruce, whose character you may have seen in portrayed in the movie *Braveheart*; and Lady Godiva – so that could be interesting. Other people I know are convinced that heaven somehow will involve golf. I have often hoped that in heaven Joseph, Benjamin, and I will be on the same basketball team and Jodi would actually come to one of my games. For Dad, after so many years of not being able to speak, maybe it would have been singing with the heavenly host or lecturing the saints on the virtues of the New England Puritans. Probably the lecturing.

Some are sure that our departed loved-ones can see what is going on in our lives here on earth. Maybe so, I don't know. It could be. There is some rather ambiguous scriptural support for it, but Dad did not believe that. He told me so about forty yards down the road from where we buried him and about 23 years ago when we buried his father. In true Joe Martin style, he told me that I could believe whatever I wanted to about that – and then he proceeded to explain to me why he was right. His argument was that it can't be heaven if we can see all of the pain people go through on earth. That certainly resonates with the image we have in Revelation of the New Jerusalem. No more tears. No more death. No more mourning or crying or pain. Such is the nature of heaven. Such is the nature of the Kingdom of God. Such is the nature of our true home.

What a gift God has made to Dad through the grace of Jesus Christ. No more tears. No more pain. No more agitation or anxiety. No more letter boards or wheelchairs. No more feeding tubes or ventilators. But as wonderful as that must be, I still don't think that would be Dad's greatest joy. No, for Dad I think the greatest joy would be the heavenly reality that no one else is crying. No one else is in pain. No one is oppressed because of his or her race or his or her gender or anything else. The dragons of ignorance and hate finally have been vanquished leaving nothing but the righteous community of faith.

When Mom returned from the hospital Saturday morning after Dad died, she had a little time to herself and so she picked up the letter board and tried to reconstruct the last word Dad was trying to communicate. E-C-E. A-C-E. E-A-C-E? And he had kept going to this part of the board. Q? No. S-A-C-E? R-E-A-C-E? N? P. P-E-A-C-E.

Jesus told his disciples, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid." Amen and Amen.

Benediction: The peace of Jesus Christ be with you all and the peace of Jesus Christ be with this world through you all. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.