

God Loves Us Anyway

I have been in a eulogistic mood this week, busily writing or thinking about writing in praise of famous or not-so-famous persons. As in so many cases, all this eulogizing has been bittersweet. For those of us who look forward with hope to the resurrection promised in the Scriptures, the act of bidding a final earthly farewell to our friends carries both that hope and the grief of absence. And not all of my thoughts of ending this week have been of the ending that results in the grave. I've also seen the ending of the public school career of our youngest son, a joyful landmark for him and for his mother and me as well. Of course, the joy of his transition is also somewhat bittersweet for us as we prepare to send him off to another city for college in the fall. Believe it or not, Sean, we really will miss you around the house and not just when the grass is high or the dishwasher needs loading. And since I'm talking about praising those who are gone or, in your case, moving on, let me take this opportunity to tell you publicly how proud I am of you as a young man of character and determination. You've accomplished something very special in your graduation from both high school and from the International Baccalaureate program. I know there have been times that I've ridden you like a rented mule about your school work but for who you are and what you can become, I am very proud and grateful.

To the subject at hand, though, one of the other focuses of my musing on transitions this week has been over the death of Rev. Will Davis Campbell. If I remember correctly, I first heard Will Campbell's name from my pastor at Kirkwood Baptist Church when I was a teenager. Campbell published his first volume of memoirs, entitled Brother to a Dragonfly in 1977 and it showed up immediately in our church library. Surprisingly, I didn't read it at that time, even when it was a finalist for the National Book Award. But I've read it since and become more and more acquainted with Brother Will, though not alas in person. He was an exemplar to many at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary when I was a student there and many of my dear friends among Baptists from the South ever since have been Will Campbell fans.

I was grieved to hear that he had suffered a stroke almost two years ago and prayed for him on and off until I heard two weeks ago that he had finally passed, never having been able to recover fully. The flood of obituaries and reminiscences that followed in print and online media caused me to recall all the wonderful, inspirational and, to borrow a word from our dear Jean Lindmark, outrageous things that I'd heard and read about him over the years. And when I looked at the New Testament passages in this week's lectionary, I thought, "Now here are some Gospel truths that Brother Will would have enjoyed teaching in his bootleg preacher way." And so I thought I would introduce Will Campbell's life to most of you and take those of you who knew him or knew of him down a path of remembrance this morning so that we could consider what these teachings from Jesus and Paul can still mean in 21st century Lynnwood.

Will Davis Campbell was born on July 18, 1924, in Amite County, Mississippi, to Lee and Hancie Campbell. They were cotton farmers without much in the way of resources other than love and faith. They were, in fact, the type of poor, undereducated laboring people from the South that are often called "rednecks," not unlike my own family until the generation of my parents. As he reflected on his family and his upbringing, Brother Will was proud to claim that designation of redneck for himself as well. In fact, he delivered a wonderfully insightful speech about the word and the people it represents or denigrates at the First Elvis Presley Symposium held at the University of Mississippi on August 7, 1995. The speech has since been printed in a number of places including in *Baptist Peacemaker*, the journal of the Baptist Peace Fellowship

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of North America of which our congregation is a partner. I've posted it on the Good Shepherd Baptist Church Facebook page and it will soon be on our website if you'd like to read it.

As Robert McFadden wrote in the *New York Times* on June 4, "Mr. Campbell grew up in a backwater of segregated schools, churches and cracker-barrel country stores where men chewed tobacco and spat bigotry." He began preaching as a teenager, in a Baptist church where the pulpit Bible had been donated by the local Ku Klux Klan, and was ordained at 17 (I was only licensed at 17). Campbell attended Louisiana College prior to joining the Army in 1942. He was a combat medic in the South Pacific during the war. In 1946, he married Brenda Fisher, who survives him. They had a son, Webb, and two daughters, Penny and Bonnie, and, at the time of Will's death, four grandchildren. He also attended Tulane University and finally settled at Wake Forest College (now University), where he received his Bachelors in English in 1950. His Master of Divinity came from Yale Divinity School in 1952. This was no ordinary redneck.

Brother Will took the pulpit at a small, rural Baptist church in Taylor, Louisiana, after graduation. As Emily Langer reported in the *Washington Post*: "he did not care for the job, and some parishioners reportedly did not care for him, his sermons on civil rights or his tendency to crop up on picket lines. "I was trained to be a minister, but I didn't make it," Rev. Campbell once told National Public Radio. "Either they weren't ready for me or I wasn't ready for them.""

It was to be his last traditional pastorate. In 1954, the year that the U.S. Supreme Court declared segregated public schools unconstitutional, he became director of religious life for the very segregated University of Mississippi. He received a number of death threats while there over his integrationist speaking and activities. Ultimately, he was sacked for playing ping pong on campus with a black minister. As he recalled in Brother to a Dragonfly: "I tried to quiet the Dean when he called me in about the ping-pong game by telling him that it was really quite within the Southern pattern. We had used separate but equal paddles, the ball was white, and there was a net drawn tightly between us."

Rev. Campbell joined the National Council of Churches in 1956 as a race-relations troubleshooter. He was soon working closely with Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King and Rev. Ralph Abernathy. He was, in fact, the only white person invited to their organizational meeting of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta in 1957. According to many accounts, he quickly overcame the initial reluctance of some of the black leaders to include him and became invaluable. As the only white among them, he could go places they could not go, gain admittance to speak with those who would not speak to them. It was Will Campbell who took the hands of black students to escort them through the angry crowds at the first attempt to integrate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, and, although that first attempt failed, federal troops led the students safely into school the next day.

In 1961, he rode with the Freedom Riders of the Congress of Racial Equality and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee who integrated interstate bus travel, braving beatings by white mobs in Anniston, Birmingham, and Montgomery, Alabama. And in 1963, he joined Dr. King's campaign of boycotts, sit-ins and marches in Birmingham, one of America's most segregated cities. Later, Brother Will remembered being met with snarling police dogs and high-pressure water hoses. "If it hits you right, the pressure from a fire hose can break your back,"

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Campbell said. “I remember seeing adults and children hit and rolling along the sidewalk like pebbles at high tide.” Will and Martin worked together until the end. Photos in Life magazine show him standing, weary and seemingly dumbstruck, on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis and grieving with his friends on the night Dr. King was assassinated.

But Brother Will stunned many of his friends by what he did in the months that followed. In his first book, Race and the Renewal of the Church, published in 1962, he had written, “I have seen and known the resentment of the racist, his hostility, his frustration, his need for someone upon whom to lay blame and to punish. With the same love that it is commanded to shower upon the innocent victim of his frustration and hostility, the church must love the racist.” Or, as he was to put it so many times later, “If you’re gonna love one, you’ve got to love ’em all.” And so he visited James Earl Ray, King’s assassin, in prison. In 1969, he famously celebrated communion with Bob Jones, the Grand Dragon of the North Carolina KKK, as Jones awaited transportation the next day to federal prison in Danbury, Connecticut, for contempt of Congress. Writing in *Rolling Stone*, years later, Lawrence Wright said, “When people asked if he really expected to save the souls of such men, Campbell allowed that that would be presumptuous: ‘They might, however, save mine.’”

As his work with the National Council of Churches came to an end, Campbell took up his ultimate calling as what he called “a bootleg preacher,” which is to say that he conducted his ministry outside the institutional church. He protested American involvement in the Vietnam War, helped draft resisters find sanctuaries in Canada, spoke against capital punishment and turned against politics, government and institutions in general for failing to provide solutions to the nation’s social problems. He wrote and spoke and travelled and lectured, pastor to a scattered congregation of those who shared his distrust of institutions. For a time, he was a chaplain of sorts to the country music industry in Nashville. He performed Roger Miller’s funeral and Trisha Yearwood’s wedding and even went on the road with Waylon Jennings as his cook. Johnny Cash and Willie Nelson were among his flock but so were Black activist Dick Gregory and Yankee liberals such as Jules Feiffer and Studs Terkel. Most of his scattered “congregation,” however, were poor whites and blacks, plain people alienated from mainstream Christianity and wary of institutions, churches and governments that stood for progress but that in their view achieved little. He once conducted a funeral for a ghost town, Golden Pond, Ky., where the residents had been removed in the late 1960s to make way for a Tennessee Valley Authority project. Later, he marched for equal rights for the LGBT community.

Rev. Campbell not only had friends in low places, he also had friends in high places. President Jimmy Carter said, “Brother Will, as he was called by so many of us who knew him, made his own indelible mark as a minister and social activist in service to marginalized people of every race, creed and calling.” In 2000, Mr. Campbell received the National Endowment for the Humanities medal from President Bill Clinton and was profiled in a PBS documentary, “God’s Will,” narrated by Ossie Davis, himself a veteran of the Civil Rights Movement.

In this busy and prolific life, Will Campbell may be best remembered for eight words he spoke relatively early in his career. In Brother to a Dragonfly, Campbell recalls how his friend P. D. East had badgered him for a succinct definition of Christianity. East did not want a long or fancy

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explanation. “I’m not too bright,” he told Campbell. “Keep it simple. In ten words or less, what’s the Christian message?” Said Brother Will, “We’re all bastards but God loves us anyway.”

And that, my friends, brings me at last, and briefly, to our scriptures for the morning. Most of us here this morning have a pretty profound sense of our own brokenness and of our need for God. But every once in a while, all good church folks are a little bit like Simon the Pharisee. We look at someone who doesn’t believe the way we do, doesn’t act like we do, doesn’t talk like we do, and we say to ourselves, “well, I can’t have anything to do with *that* person.” Even worse, we may say to ourselves, “obviously God can’t have anything to do with that person.” Simon the Pharisee said, “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner.” Will Campbell said, “We’re all bastards but God loves us anyway.”

It’s hardly a new problem and we have a tendency to enshrine it. We like to try to prove to God how much we deserve God’s love by telling God how little others deserve it. Take a look again at the excerpt from Psalm 5 we read together as our Call to Worship. The Psalmist is absolutely right to give thanks to Yahweh for hearing his prayer, absolutely right to give thanks for Yahweh’s abundant and steadfast love. But the writer of this Psalm is wrong in pointing to the sins of others to glorify himself. As Will Campbell said, “If you’re gonna love one, you’ve got to love ’em all.” And our Loving Creator does indeed love us all, all the world, so much that the Word became Flesh and dwelt among us and gave himself for us. We may try to make God choose up sides, make ourselves look better at the expense of others, but God loves us anyway.

We must remember as we go through life that there are no untouchables, not “sinful women,” not Pharisees, not even Klansmen. Another oft-repeated quote from Will Campbell is, “Mr. Jesus died for the bigots, too.” And so we must reach out, even to the people we think are our enemies because, on the off-chance that we are right and that they are somehow further from God’s will than we are, we must remember what Jesus said to Simon, that those who are forgiven much will show much love in return. So we must forgive and learn to love and we must lead the ones we forgive to know that God forgives them and loves them, too.

When we hear the words of Paul to the Galatians about not being justified by the works of the law, we may smile smugly and say to ourselves, “oh, yes, those Jews had that problem understanding Jesus, didn’t they.” But the fact of the matter is, we, too, concoct our own set of codes by which we want to believe that God blesses or withholds blessing. We talk about being intolerant of intolerance, for example, and we forget that Mr. Jesus died for the bigots, too. We congratulate ourselves on how many hours we spend in God’s service or on how honest we are or how we have raised our children and we forget that we, too, are broken, rebellious, sinful in little ways and that all of those things look to God just like the motes we are trying to pick out of our brother’s or sister’s eye. Or perhaps they look like beams to God. We’re all bastards. But God loves us anyway.

Some of you may find those words from Will Campbell offensive. If I’ve offended any of you, I humbly apologize because I do love you all. You may have found Will Campbell offensive had you met him. He was well-known as a whiskey-drinking grump, a redneck who made moonshine and stomped around his Tennessee cabin in cowboy boots and denim uttering streams

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of sacred and profane commentary. But, you know, he was in really good company. The good religious folk who turned on Jesus complained that he was a blasphemer, a glutton and a drunkard who hung out with prostitutes and tax collectors. They couldn't stand it that Jesus loved those obviously broken people just as much as he loved them. They weren't grateful enough to God to be gracious to those who had so much to be grateful for.

My brothers and my sisters, let us not of fitness fondly dream, unless it is the fitness that has come to us as a gift, a free and gracious gift from our Loving Creator. If we are honest, we must admit that we cannot fathom love so overwhelming that it covers all our brokenness. And yet, we know that God is both gracious and faithful. We know that God has forgiven us, just as God forgave Simon, just as God forgave the sinful woman, just as God forgave Saul, the persecutor of the Church. We're all bastards but God loves us anyway. Thanks be to God.