

Sermons at St. Luke's

*A sermon preached by the Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr.
for the funeral of John Satterfield on July 21, 2008.*

Hear again these words of Jesus from the Gospel according to John, "I am the good shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me." We are here today to celebrate that the good shepherd has brought John Satterfield into the fold. The good shepherd knows John, and John knows the good shepherd. Thanks be to God.

Just over three months ago, many of us gathered here for the funeral of John's beloved wife, Carolyn. And while we celebrated that Carolyn had gone home to be with her Lord and shepherd, we worried greatly over John. We worried about what losing his wife and friend of 63 years would do to him. We could sense his profoundly broken heart. We need not worry about John any longer. His heart is healed. He has gone home to be with God and to join Carolyn in the communion of saints.

There are some people who will say that John died from his broken heart, that it was too much to go on living without his partner and friend. In that case, it might be easy to pity him. But John does not need our pity. Most of us including John, himself, would say that John had a broken heart. And while some people will say that he died from a broken heart, I want to say that John Satterfield lives because of a broken heart. John lives in heaven because he dared to love deeply. John lives because his heart was tender. John lives with God, because he refused to make his heart hard. Instead he let it break, and God's healing grace could then be poured into the cracks. John asked God's Holy Spirit to minister to him in his grief. And when he left his earthly body, when he took his final breath just after we said the Lord's prayer with him for the last time, it was clear that he was at peace. John lives because of a broken heart.

John's heart was tender and it was generous. He loved deeply and broadly. He had a reputation for tenderness and caring. And he seemed to love more and more the longer he lived. Of course, he loved Carolyn so much. Although they were very different in personality, they found ways to compliment each other. Their love bridged the gaps and managed the bumps in the road. It takes a tender heart to love that way for 63 years. It takes a heart that is willing to be broken and mended, broken and mended again. John also deeply loved his children and his grandchildren. He loved all children, and he loved with a childlike sense of wonder and playfulness. He must have understood that verse in the Bible where Jesus says, "you must become like a little child to enter the kingdom of God." John knew that the smiles of children are like gateways to heaven. His daughters, Lynn and Carlotta, told me a wonderful story about how some neighborhood children once came by the house on Hermitage Court wanting John to help them plant a garden. Of course, John also loved the earth and gardening and all the green growing things. He took the children and they planted some watermelon seeds in the ground. Those children went on vacation for a couple of weeks and while they were gone, John went and bought some fully grown watermelons and nestled them near where the seeds had been planted. When the children returned they were delighted to find that they had grown some watermelons! John's love of planting things and children influenced him to plant an organization called the Friends of Watts Street School which provides extra opportunities beyond what the school's budget can provide. It provides things to make the children smile. John's loving heart wanted to give something to the children that would grow and contribute to their growth as well.

John started the Friends of Watts Street school in his retirement years. John had a heart for life, and he refused to let age dictate how he was going to live. In a time of life when many people are winding down, John was winding up. I was amazed to hear that at age 77 he went on a rafting trip down the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon. And while most people were taking a helicopter to the bottom, he walked down. He wanted to see it up close for himself. At a time in life when many people become more entrenched in their ways and attitudes, John was willing to see and experience life in new ways.

His willingness to try new things and welcome new people made him a wonderful part of a community. I was so impressed that during the last three months he was willing to allow me, a new priest, to come and visit him. He greeted me so warmly, "Hi, how are you, Joe?" even as he was struggling with grief. John loved community. He loved relationships. In the last several years, he and Carolyn loved being a part of the Croasdaile community. Their sense of caring and hospitality and friendliness will be greatly missed.

They will also be missed at St. Luke's. John loved this church. In our last conversation together, John kept telling me over and over how much this parish and its people had meant to him. He found community here. He found spiritual nourishment here. And he found so many ways to contribute to the life of this community and to nourish others.

John loved the things of God, and although I might get in trouble for saying this in Durham, John knew that God made the sky Carolina Blue for a reason. John, like many of us who matriculated at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, felt that when Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd," his flock included not only lambs but rams as well. John's love of sports, especially Carolina sports, made him wonderfully human. John's ability to be human, to be himself, endeared him to so many people. John did not pretend to be perfect. He was genuine.

He was real, which is why when Carolyn died, he did not hide his sadness. He allowed himself to feel the full force of grief. As I said, he allowed his heart to break, and while a broken heart is a sad thing, it is only tragic if it makes us bitter. John did not turn bitter. He turned to God. The past three months were difficult for John, but even as he faced injuries, illness, and deep sadness, whenever I visited with him, he was always eager to pray, eager to connect with his God. Perhaps he had a sense that a broken heart is an open heart. A broken heart is a heart waiting to be healed, waiting to be raised to wholeness. Perhaps all of us who are feeling broken hearts today will find some comfort that our savior, Jesus Christ, allowed himself to be broken on the cross that he might share the gift of eternal life and healing with us. Today we celebrate that through the love of the resurrected Christ, John's heart is healed. And God promises eventual healing for us as well.

"I am the good shepherd," says Jesus. "I know my own, and my own know me." On the day John died, his daughter, Carlotta, kept saying, "he's walking toward Christ!" Both she and Lynn had been given the deep sense that the good shepherd was leading their father home. Thanks be to God for the good shepherd who laid down his life so that the sheep might be saved. Thanks be to God for a faithful lamb, John Satterfield, through whom so much goodness and love has been revealed. Thanks be to God for broken hearts, for in our brokenness we can receive the healing love of our broken and risen Savior.