

John E. O'Neal

December 2, 1937-July 17, 2010

"With rue my heart is laden
For golden friends I had,
For many a rose-lipt maiden
And many a lightfoot lad."
A E Housman

Long time family friend Carol Stigger added the following;

I hope those days on the river
When the Miller-Millar-O'Neal Gang
Shared boats and beer and burgers
And laughs still warm all our hearts.
Goodbye John O. Save us a seat by the campfire...

Rev. Dick Piscatelli

While Carole and I sat watching all the people come to visitation for John I thought what a great tribute to a fine man. When we left a little after 7, people were still wrapped around the room waiting their turn to pay their respects to his brother, his sisters, his son, his daughter and of course, his wife Doris. When we left I went up to Doris and Wendy to let them know I must leave so that I could have time to do this sermon. She, and they, were all getting tired, but I believe it was a good tired feeling because so many people, both young and old, so many of you who came last night eased their shock and burden of his passing. You couldn't make the pain go away, but you did lessen it just a little with your words, your smiles, your laughter, your hugs, your remembrances. For that, on behalf of the family I say thank you.

God's word at a time like this brings comfort. The 23rd Psalm talks about walking through the valley of death and not fearing because he is with us. It doesn't remove the pain of losing a loved one or a friend, but it brings lots of hope. We know that God said there is a time for all things under the sun, a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to be sad and a time to be happy. A time to mourn and a time to get on with our lives. That's great advice. While most of us slept God sent for John E. O'Neal. He came when he least expected it. He came when Doris least expected it. He came when all of you least expected it. In reality we all know this...there is a time to be born and then there is a time to die. We handle the first pretty good. The last we struggle with. We struggle because we don't understand how wonderful it is on the other side for those who belong to Jesus. When this life comes to an end for those who belong to Christ it becomes a celebration, a coronation, for that which we have strived after has been achieved. We have lived, loved, laughed and enjoyed life, family, friends, and the things that God has blessed us with. We come into this world with our name written in one book and the date when an invitation will be sent for you to return to the one who gave you life, and when we give our lives to Jesus our name is written in God's Book of Life so that when your life comes to an end you will be greeted at the Pearly Gates and ushered into your new heavenly home. What brings us comfort is the knowledge that this life is not the end, only a new beginning. Death is writing the

final chapter on this life looking back, and beginning a new chapter full of empty pages for what is to be. God had a master plan from the beginning of time where our birth and death was part of that plan. There is the death to sin and rebirth to a life of a changed heart and forgiveness. There is the physical death followed by a new life in heaven where we will enjoy the streets of gold, being with God and Jesus, seeing old friends and family and friends. Our God is such a wonderful God that he has thought and planned for everything under the sun. He did it all, the creating of each of us in our mother's wombs, planning each of our lives, giving us the gifts and graces that could be used to learn, study, and be in his ministry to each other. He made us in his image, putting his loving and caring spirit within us. Then through the sending of his Son we find that God's plan included allowing his Son to die on the cross that our sins could be forgiven so that we could have a clean slate in order to be part of his family. But it wasn't just his dying, it was his rising that did something wonderful, it means that Jesus defeated death and because he did he opened the door to eternal life for those who believe in him. He basically says, "Come, all who believe, take my hand, and don't be afraid. Death and the grave cannot hold you because you are my child. Come and be part of a new life where there is no more death, no more pain, no more tears, no more sorrows, and no more separation. Rejoice! Because this has been planned for you for many, many years, since the beginning of time."

That, my friends, and the family of John O'Neal what has happened to John. In one moment of time he took his final breath on this earth and the next thing you know he was up there being greeted at the Pearly Gates by his friends, his family, his parents, his grandparents, his brothers Jeffrey and Jerry. It's an old fashion reunion. While we gather to remember John this morning, his coronation process has begun. Our God has welcomed him home and given him the prize of eternal life as he puts a crown upon his head and says, "Well done my good and faithful servant. Much I have given you, much you have accomplished. I am well pleased by how you lived and loved and cared for others and the legacy you have left your family in your time on earth. You can now rejoice and rest from your labors." And so shall it be.

During visitation as I saw the many people come and go I was struck by how noisy it was. But then I listened for a while and I heard laughter, I saw smiles on people's faces as they shared with the family little tidbits. I heard one fellow laughing say he had been standing in line since 4 o'clock. Of course he was joking, it was only an hour, but those lines were long, but people didn't mind because they came to say, either with words, or hugs, maybe even a tear, how much John meant to them because somehow, someway, he had touched their lives. It could have been when he was a teacher, or a teller in the bank, or when he rose to be president of that bank, or when he spent time as a realtor. Or maybe it was when they met on

the street or in a restaurant or a fast food place or gathered for worship in church, or a function in the community. These people were touched by a man who cared and tried to help others no matter who they were.

One of 8 kids, this guy grew up with gifts that God gave him. He was a twin, and I don't know which one was born first, he or Joan, but you know I understand they have the same personalities. They all came into a loving family where love grew and never stopped. When John was much younger many a kid would be welcomed to the O'Neal home after school to sit around their large dining room table perhaps doing homework waiting to be at some evening event at the school because it was too far to go home and there were no school buses. Everyone was welcomed there, and I'm sure they stretched the food so no one would go away hungry. I'm sure John's living siblings could tell many a tale about those days. And so I thought as I heard the laughter and the talking how much John would have enjoyed this. Oh, he would not have wanted to be the center of attention because that was not who he was. But he would love to have joined with you and talk and laugh and say, "remember when we did this? Remember when we did that?" Or maybe he would say, "I haven't seen you in many years, what are you doing now?" Or maybe he would say, "I remember when you called me at home when I was bank president and you were looking for a car loan and it was Saturday and we were closed. I said, sure go get that car and come see me on Monday and

we will finalize the paper work.” Or maybe you were one of those who sat in his class room as he tried to broaden your mind through math and science. He wanted you to reach your full potential and be all you could be. He wanted to teach you how to make it in a world that was changing. That was John O’Neal. The man who knew no stranger, helped whoever he could, taught his kids what it meant to be family and how to love and accept everyone for who they were.

Even at the last he kept teaching. Well, maybe not teaching but remembering the stories. Many of you know on Friday night he and Doris and others gathered for class reunions. Lee Miller told me he had a question about who were the guys who built a cabin someplace. Lee couldn’t remember, so he asked his friend of many years, John, and sure enough, John remembered the four guys who did that.

John enjoyed life right up till the end. That was God’s gift to him. One last time he enjoyed Doris and his friends sitting around a table with food and fellowship and stories. Who knew in just a few hours he would be sitting around the heavenly banquet table with the likes of James, Peter, Thomas, Paul, John Wesley, Martin Luther, and so many more as they were blessed with the grace of God and his son Jesus the Christ. Such a feast. Such a wonderful gathering which he will enjoy over and over again.

So friends, and Doris, Bob, Wendy, Pat, Don, Jean, Joan, and Joy, and the rest of you who are family we don’t come here to mourn his passing with tears of

sorrow but we come to rejoice in his new home with tears of gladness that his final battle on this earth is over, he has finished the race, he has crossed the finish line, he has received his just reward and we rejoice that we had the privilege of having John E. O'Neal in our lives for as long as we did.

I keep wanting to get back to visitation and the gathering and laughter because Doris and the kids told me how fun loving the family was. They were so fun loving that they took vacations together renting a place that could hold them all. They always had a blast. And then John and some others bought a cabin on the river near Havana where they enjoyed fishing and much more. So when I heard that laughter the other night a hymn came to mind that says, "Shall we gather at the river, where bright angel feet have trod, with its crystal tide forever flowing by the throne of God? Yes, we'll gather at the river, the beautiful, beautiful river, gather with the saints at the river that flows by the throne of God." That just seemed to fit last evening and even today. Family and friends gathering at the river to enjoy each other's company, enjoying the peace and the fun and most importantly, God's presence and the biscuits and gravy that John often cooked, at least for his family. And what a wonderful time last weekend John and Bob had with a weekend getaway there. They just decided they needed some bonding. But maybe it was God's way of making this a special time before John got his call to come home. They didn't fish. They didn't fix anything. They just relaxed and

enjoyed the weekend that would be their last on this side of time. And Wendy said how special it was at the end of June when she came to spend a week with her folks. It turned out to be a special week with great memories of one last time of family gathering, having fun and just being together. You think that was an accident? I don't! I believe it was God ordained. He knew the future. They didn't.

The kids and Doris said how much of a trickster and a tease John was. I guess it runs in the O'Neal family. You can almost see that in his smile. And what a smile he had. He perhaps could have charmed a snake out of a basket with his smile. I remember him for being tall, with a wonderful singing voice you could hear often coming from the back of the church as he sung the hymns. I remember asking him to be one of the disciples for one of our dramas and he said yes, but at the last minute due to some testing that caused him not to feel good he had to back out. He said he would be glad to help some other time. But one day I had an inspiration as I was going over my sermon that Sunday morning at home. I don't remember much about that sermon, but I asked John to do something for me at just the right time. I was preaching and I said, "And God said..." and from the back of the church in a loud Godly deep voice, like it was the voice of God himself, came, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him." It was John, and the congregation almost came to attention, turned to see where that booming voice came from that made them sit up attentively. Then not too long ago when John and Doris came to

church one Sunday someone had taken their seats in the back and they had to come and sit in the front pew right near me. I went to John and said that's what he gets for getting here late. And besides, his next seat would be next to me up on the altar. He laughed and the next week he made sure they were back to their regular back seats.

Loving, caring, giving, what you see is the man God gave as a gift to Edmond and Bertha Dexter O'Neal on December 2, 1937. God blessed him with his loving wife and high school sweetheart Doris and they were blessed with Bob and Wendy. Many friends were made throughout the years. God was good to John and Doris and the kids. And we might add God's grace was poured out upon John over and over again.

He retired but never retired because he worked in the community cutting grass, being a thoughtful neighbor helping cooking at fish fries at the church and serving God's people wherever he was needed. And did you know he was one of the founders of the Williamsville Fire Department years ago? Of course you did.

Remember I said God's word says there is a time for everything under the sun. That includes bringing this message of hope and resurrection and comfort to a close. I pray God has touched your spirits this day as we have remembered just briefly some things in John's wonderful life on this earth. I pray that God has reached out and wiped a few tears from your eyes, as he holds your hearts in his

hands and reaches his loving arms around you to assure you that he will take care of John until you join him one day in heaven where there will be a grand reunion as John will show you the ropes of the heavenly life.

But before I finish I must say one more thing. I was told that there was a rumor going around many years ago about something that happened when John was lots younger. Now I said it was a rumor, but I know someone else began to tell me the story I'm about to tell you during visitation. It seems there was a rumor going on that someone or some people put an unnamed structure, something like an outhouse, upon the Williamsville old water tower with a dummy standing near the door. Remember I said it was just a rumor. They say they have pictures of it someplace but I didn't see it. But the fact to the rumor is no one actually knew for certain who did that. As for the picture there were no people....unless you consider the dummy. But the rumor was..... Well...let's just leave that between God and those who know the rest of the story.

Today we thank our God for the memories and we ask God's sustaining grace to be upon all of us this day, especially Doris, Bob, Wendy and his brother and sisters and the other family members, and we who were lucky enough to have called John E. O'Neal our friend.

Let me close by just quoting a part of a song by Toby Keith that he wrote when his best friend died this past year. It fits this day to a tee and John's life. It goes, "I'm going to miss that smile, I'm going to miss you my friend."

John, enjoy heaven and keep the lights on for us. Thanks for the memories my friend. So until we all gather at the river, the wonderful, beautiful river of God, may our God give us strength, comfort, peace as we walk with him along the pathway to life. Amen!