

“FUNERAL SERMON”
Dale Ernest Timberlake
May 30, 2009

In our Scripture readings we heard first from Solomon: *“There is a time to be born, and a time to die; ... a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.”*

From Psalm 139, we heard that God knows us from within our Mother’s womb: *“For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place.... your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast are the sum of them!*

From St. Paul we learn that *“this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality”*.

At first glance it is probably hard to reconcile the image from Psalm 139: that God knits us together in our mother’s womb and the reality that some babies are born with handicaps – like Dale was. In a perfect world that wouldn’t happen, would it? But it does in our world, which

further reinforces with us how imperfect this world is compared to the perfect plan with which God began.

We humans have a remarkable capacity for messing things up, and also for displaying the most remarkable reflections of having been created in the image of the living God.

Dale was born with Down Syndrome at a time when the accepted practice was to place the child in an institution to live out the less than 20 year life expectancy. It was thought that families just weren't equipped to deal with a special-needs child; that the child would be too disruptive and would destroy a normal family – putting undue strain on the marriage and on other siblings, if there were any.

Some believe we have an enemy of our soul, one who is constantly seeking to “kill, steal, and destroy” our lives. I believe that. I believe in the devil because Jesus encountered him and taught about him, and also because I've met him. And, if this thief and liar has anything to do with upsetting God's natural order – including causing babies to be born with deformities, and handicapped – then he sure picked the wrong mother when he picked on Norma Timberlake. What was intended to break a mother's heart and destroy a family

became the occasion for one of the greatest love stories, and displays of God's grace in human flesh, I have ever encountered.

We are here today to celebrate the life of Dale Ernest Timberlake, but that would be impossible without also celebrating the motherhood of Norma. Norma, if I was wearing a hat right now, I'd take it off to you.

We can't celebrate Dale's life without also celebrating your love and absolute refusal to treat Dale in the manner that was expected and recommended to you six decades ago. If Dale had to be born with Down's syndrome, then he sure was blessed to be born to you.

Somehow God was able to work a bad thing into a better thing when Dale came into this world the son of Norma and Harold Timberlake. There was already something in the character of Norma that refused to accept that the way things are, is the way they should stay. Whether it was having, and keeping at home, a handicapped child that doctors and others recommended be 'put away', or deciding to be the first women to stand for election on her church's Vestry, Norma is a person designed by God to be a challenger of accepted norms, and a pioneer in establishing new traditions and ways of doing things; and that included raising a Down-syndrome

child, and causing fundamental changes in the way the State of Ohio viewed handicapped children, and the services they would eventually offer to them and their families.

So, how were Norma and Harold able to do with a child who officially had no hope and no future? What kind of person did they raise? Who will tell me?

Now, we gather to say good-bye to Dale's earthly remains. Emotionally, we are conflicted. There is legitimate sorrow; but it is more than balanced by even more legitimate joy at what God has done for Dale: *When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that it is written:*

Death is swallowed up in victory.

O death, where is thy victory?

O death, where is thy sting?" 1 Cor. 15:54-55

In God's plan, Dale has moved out of the temporary dwelling place he has occupied for six decades and now inhabits an immortal body that will never suffer wear, tear, disease, brokenness, fear, or loneliness.

Listen to how St. Paul describes what has happened to Dale. From 2 Corinthians 5:1-5, we read

these words: *“For we know that when this tent we live in now is taken down – when we die and leave these bodies – we will have wonderful new bodies in heaven, homes that will be ours forevermore, made for us by God himself, and not by human hands. How weary we grow of our present bodies. That is why we look forward eagerly to the day when we shall have heavenly bodies which we shall put on like new clothes. For we shall not be merely spirits without bodies. These earthly bodies make us groan and sigh, but we wouldn’t like to think of dying and having no bodies at all. We want to slip into our new bodies so that these dying bodies will, as it were, be swallowed up by everlasting life. This is what God has prepared for us and, as a guarantee, he has given us His Holy Spirit.”*

I believe that Dale had God’s Spirit in this life in his Earthly tent. I sensed God’s presence with him, sustaining him and helping this life become as satisfactory as it could possibly be. Dale was baptized and I believe God’s Spirit had full access to Dale’s soul. I believe Dale and the Lord Jesus Christ enjoyed full spiritual communion with each other.

Jesus said to the thief on the Cross:
“Today, you will be with me in paradise.” How much

more do we sense that Dale was given that same promise even though he lived in a body that could not communicate in ways we consider normal. The Apostle Paul wrote: **“We are handicapped on all sides, but we are never frustrated; we are puzzled, but never alone: we may be knocked down but we are never knocked out! Every day we experience something of the death of the Lord Jesus, so that we many also know the power of the life of Jesus in these bodies of ours ...**

We wish you could see how all this is working out for your benefit; and how the more grace God gives, the more thanksgiving will rebound to his glory. This is the reason that we never collapse. The outward person does indeed suffer wear and tear, but every day the inward person receives fresh strength. These little troubles (which are really so transitory) are winning for us a permanent, glorious and solid reward out of all proportion to our pain. For we are looking all the time not at the visible things but at the invisible. The visible things are transitory: it is the invisible things that are really permanent”.

2 Corinthians 4:7-17, Phillips.

Norma had begun to pray that she would not precede Dale in death. She was concerned about who would look after Dale. Jesus, who is always trying to comfort and provide for his lambs took care of the matter. Remember these words from our Lord: **“Let not your heart be troubled. You are trusting in God, now trust in me. There are many homes up there where my Father lives, and I am going to prepare them for your coming. When everything is ready, then I will come and get you, so that you can always be with me where I am. If this weren’t so, I would tell you plainly – I am leaving you with a gift – peace of mind and heart! And the peace I give isn’t fragile like the peace the world gives. So don’t be troubled or afraid.”**

John 14:1-3, 27 TLB

We are here this morning to celebrate the peace Christ gave Dale, gave to Norma, and has given us. Through that witness of the Spirit we are at peace regarding Dale’s relationship with God through Jesus Christ. It is enough to make a Mother’s heart glad. God is good, all the time; all the time, God is good!