

“Carrying the Cross”

Robert Stewart Memorial July 7, 2020

We are gathered here, in the Ark of God’s Church, in remembrance of Robert John Stewart, child of the Heavenly Father by Baptism and faith-ful by the Holy Spirit until the end of his days on this fallen earth. These are not Robert’s deeds. They are the deeds of God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit on his behalf...for him just as they are for us as well. God gave him a vocation, many vocations actually, in which he lived and lived out the missions he was called to, to name just a few, as a son, brother, husband, father, grandfather, great grandfather, designer, artist, and not least of all, Christian witness. What a full life indeed!

Now, in many places in the Bible it talks about carrying your own cross. In Luke 14:27 Jesus says, “Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.” The Apostle Peter explained this by saying (1 Peter 4:13), “But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when His glory is revealed.” It should not surprise you to find suffering in your life. Jesus Christ was a man well-acquainted with suffering, as were his disciples. Why should we be different? In fact, God’s plan of salvation is a study in weakness and suffering, the theology of the cross, rather than the theology of glory.

God did not descend to the earth, flaming sword in hand and 10,000 angels in tow to defeat the powers of darkness and death. He was born a weak human baby, lived an obscure life, taught a ragtag group of followers in a dusty and poor part of the world, and then submitted to a kangaroo court, was beaten until unrecognizable and crucified unto death. He did not need to do this to defeat the powers of darkness and death. He could have done that by one, simple Word. But He needed to do it to redeem Robert, and you, and me.

And then, in His awesome power, Jesus was raised from the dead so that all who believed in His person and work would also rise from the dead to life everlasting...by God’s grace through faith.

This was God's gift to Robert, and you, and me, that gives us a sure and certain hope that endures through any circumstances. Even a long battle with an unknown but devastatingly debilitating disease.

Now how do we know that Robert had such a faith as this, a faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ? Let me count the ways! First and foremost, for as long as he was able, Robert availed himself of God's Word and Sacraments, the means of grace, forgiveness, and life. In fact, he received Word and Sacrament right up to a few hours before his death.

Furthermore, in his suffering, even more than in his times of health and plenty, he witnessed to his faith in Jesus and the power of God through his sense of humor. Despite suffering symptoms similar to Lou Gehrig's Disease or Multiple Sclerosis, Robert could crack a joke and say he was suffering from RSMS, Robert Stewart Muscular Syndrome.

Or the time when his daughter, who sometimes could get impatient and short with nurses when their service left something to be desired, decided to be as patient as a saint with a nurse that had been frustrating her greatly, you know, to kill her with kindness (heaping hot coals upon her head). And when the nurse finally left, Robert burst out, exclaiming loudly, "What the heck was that!? You were so kind to her!"

When I entered the room, in those last few hours before Robert was delivered from his body of death, Robert was lying, motionless and silent on his bed. He was at the point where he could no longer move, or speak, or even swallow. I walked over to him announced that I was there, "Hey Robert! It's Pastor Jim! I just came to visit, to tell you I love you, brother and to bring you God's gifts." And he lifted up his hand so I could take it. And then I told him that I would be doing a little service and serving Holy Communion to his family that had gathered to be 'round him. And I said, "Robert, you know the words of liturgy and God can hear your thoughts just as clearly as he can hear us talking, so just think along with us as we say the words out loud." And he slightly moved his head and blinked his eyes in affirmation.

So, we had a little service: Confession and Absolution, the Apostles Creed, the Lord's Prayer, etc. And then it was time for Communion. I laid it all out and turned to Robert and said, I'm about to serve Holy Communion and I would like to try giving you the blood of Jesus. I've got a Q-tip here, and when it's your turn, I will dip it in Jesus' blood and touch it on your tongue if you are able." And we communed. And when it was Robert's turn, I turned to him and said, "Ok, Robert, I've dipped the Q-tip in the blood of Jesus and I'm ready to put it on your tongue." And he opened his mouth. And I put it on his tongue. And it was like standing at the gate of heaven!

Afterward, when I was taking my leave, I went to Robert and told him I was leaving. And I told him, "Robert, I look forward to seeing you again in the new creation. We will both be in our resurrected bodies, made new and perfect, never to fail or grow old again. And when I do see you, I'm gonna challenge you to a contest to see who can jump the highest!" And his eyes sparkled!

Robert was faithful in the small things, clinging to the promises of God in Christ Jesus. And his Lord and Savior was, is, and always shall be faithful in the greatest things. For His steadfast love endures forever, His promises are never broken, and He is strong to deliver.

Robert's sure and certain hope is also your sure and certain hope: Jesus Christ born, lived, suffered, died, and risen to defeat sin, death and the devil on your behalf that you might rise again to new life. As Jesus said to His disciples, "A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me."

May the love of God, and the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit, abide in you to life everlasting! Amen!

Yours in the Love of Christ,

*Pastor Jim Toma, July 7, 2020
Redeemer Lutheran Church, HB*