

Requiem Eucharist for John S. Woodward
Grace Episcopal Church
Saint Francisville, LA

Good morning and welcome to this celebration of life for John. I am Fr. Roman Roldan, the rector here at Grace, but around these parts they just know me as the Klein sister's pastor. And this is just ok with me. I must confess that this funeral is special to me. Not because I knew John terribly well, in fact, I only met him on two occasions and we spoke only very briefly. This celebration is special to me because this is the very first funeral service I conduct for a fellow clergyman. Beyond this, there are several points of contact between John and I. We both had prior careers before entering ministry, I as a Social Worker and John as a successful attorney in New York and Massachusetts. Both married the love of our lives. Both had children we adore. Both became convinced at some point that only a life of ministry made sense for us. And, both entered the ordained ministry and served our congregations with distinction. It is for this reason that it is my honor to be here today.

The one resource most pastors have in abundance is hope. We know that there is more to life than what we see. We know that beyond the pain, struggles, conflicts, and even beyond the joys of this life, there is a reality too wonderful to put into words. We, who are specks of life, living in an incredible small planet, in a very small galaxy, in a minuscule small corner of the universe, are loved by our God. This God who created everything, in whose hands rests the entire future of the universe, loves us and cares for us in ways that we can not understand. Lamentations tells us that "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning."

Pastors know that God accepts our imperfect offering of service and uses it for his glory and for the advancement of his kingdom on this earth. Our failures of courage, our doubts, our resentments, our exhaustion, and our anxiety at carrying the burdens of so many people on our shoulders are all transformed into fertile seeds that in some mysterious way increases the harvest of the kingdom. Our small sacrifices matter to God, even if at times we don't believe they matter to the church. Our faithfulness in showing up day after day to minister at the Lord's table of Word and Sacrament matters to God, even if at times we are so physically and emotionally tired that we resent having to get up so early, perhaps after spending most of the night in a hospital comforting the dying. Our intellectual insights and study presented during sermons and teaching lessons matter to God and make a difference, even when we sometimes feel resentful that not enough people come to church or studies.

Pastors know that their self-worth is not dependent on their own wit, intelligence, work ethic, or powerful relationships. Their self-worth comes from the one who called them, equipped them, and sent them out into the world to preach and live the Gospel of his Son. Their self-worth comes from the knowledge of knowing that at a time when many shied away, they stepped forward and said, "Here I am, send me!" At a time when the world was more preoccupied with self-

aggrandizement and the satisfaction of all our wants and needs, they chose to put some of their needs in abeyance, to leave what was familiar to them, and to venture in the Lord's vineyards, whatever they happened to be. At a time when so many of us spend so much time and effort trying to find ourselves, carve out an identity with which we can survive in this highly competitive world, constantly re-invent and rebrand who we are, they accepted the identity of a simple pastor and the mission of a laborer in a vineyard, a listener, befriender, and guide.

Pastors know that there is truth and meaning in this world because they know that truth and meaning can only be found in Jesus of Nazareth, God's suffering servant who died for us and who left us his Spirit to guide us into all truth. When confronted with relativism, the pastor holds on to the truth of Scripture that Jesus is the truth, the way, and the life. When confronted with existential anxiety, the Pastor looks at the cross of Christ and finds meaning and purpose, a sense of vocation, and an imperative to love as the one hanging from that tree loved the world. When confronted with pain and doubt the Pastor endures prayerfully because he knows that all things will work out at the end for those who love Jesus of Nazareth and seek to be obedient to his will.

Pastors are not perfect people and John Woodward was by no means perfect. As all of us have, this brilliant man educated at Yale, had ghosts that haunted him. But, it is not because pastors are perfect that they are effective in showing the world the love Christ has for them. It is not their perfection, but their faithfulness in the midst of imperfection that builds God's kingdom. The pastor's most admirable quality is that he keeps showing up even when at times he feels like quitting, he keeps on loving others even when at times he feels misunderstood and unappreciated, he keeps a life of prayer and devotion even when at times he feels alone and distant from God and others. We are not saying goodbye today to a perfect man, a perfect husband, a perfect son, a perfect father, a perfect brother, uncle or cousin. But, we are saying good bye to a faithful man who did his best, even while dealing with his own deep issues.

Do not look at John's life as a failure or a tragedy. You will insult his memory if you do so. There are victories that were won along the way and those victories have made a difference. There are people out here who came to Christ because of John's faithful ministry, there are people out here who still remember a word of comfort, a telephone call when they needed it the most, a drive in snow and ice to visit someone who was dying, a sermon preached while he had 102 fever but still showed up to church because there was no one else who could remind people how much God loves them. There are people out there who were baptized, married, and counseled by John and when they think of him they do it with gratitude and love. We are not here to remember a tragedy, we are here to give thanks for faithfulness in the midst of pain. We are here to say thanks for sacrifice and love given when no one else seemed willing to give them.

We often place pastors on pedestals and by doing so we rob them of their humanity. I invite you to resist this temptation. There is only one perfect pastor and

he is Jesus Christ himself. The rest of us are broken pots trying very hard to hold it all together for the sake of the one who sent us and the people he loves. I am here to remind you of the human John and not the pedestal John. And I give thanks for his life, for his beloved wife, Pam, for his children, for all the people he touched, for his faithful and sweet mother, for his siblings, and for his entire family. I give thanks that God saw it fit to place John in their lives and saw it fit to take him into his eternal heavenly rest. I know that John is with God this very day in a place where there is no pain, no addiction, no anguish, no hurt, no anger, and no resentments. I know John is with God and I know we will see him again some day. Perhaps I will have a chance to get to know him better after all.

Now, I am known for ending all funerals the same way and I ask for your indulgence this morning. I pray that this may not be the time of the sermon when you fall asleep because you know what's coming next. Just the opposite, I want you to pay even more attention. My friends we know where John is, so in many ways this service is not so much for him as it is for us who mourn. John's life reminds us that life is short. We are here one second and gone the next. It is for this reason that I must remind you that today is the day to make amends, today is the day to ask for forgiveness, today is the day to say your "I love you's" and your "I forgive you's". And you must do this today because you may not be around tomorrow. The reality is that life is too short to live whatever you have left of it in anger and resentment. Today is the day to mend what's broken and reach out in love to those God has placed in your lives.

A life without God and without others is a life filled with misery. I pray that if that is your life, today will be the day you make a decision to return to God. he loves you and seeks to have a relationship with you. May he continue to bless you, Amen!