

“Be Still”

In the name of Christ our Champion Redeemer, dear family of God, loved ones of Wilbur Rolph:

Artists sometimes try to picture what it will be like when a believer in Jesus comes home to glory. One picture I’m remembering has no pearly gates, just the smiling face of Jesus with his arms opened wide. That hug from God will be like no other.

For Wilbur this past Thursday, I have a similar, but slightly different picture in mind. There’s Jesus, smiling, embracing His child home at last. But I see two men’s smiling faces on either side. Both are wearing name tags and holding up a sign like the ones chauffeurs use in airports. The sign has the same name as theirs. They all say, “Lazarus.” There’s Lazarus the brother of Mary and Martha, good friend of Jesus. There’s the Lazarus who suffered such poverty in this life, now rich with all the wealth of God’s heaven. And then there’s the sign that says, “Welcome home, Lazarus, a.k.a. Wilbur Rolph!”

God has a sense of humor too; I’m convinced of that. We thought Wilbur was going home to glory on multiple occasions. Three times in hospice, as his daughters told me, “graduated” once, “kicked out” another – too healthy to stay when once again he recovered. It was as if Jesus was raising Wilbur from the dead as He raised His friend Lazarus for sisters Mary and Martha.

It was my privilege to serve as Wilbur’s pastor for many years. With all the coming and going of these past years, one thing was totally missing. There was not one word of complaint. Come to think of it, I don’t remember Wilbur ever saying an unkind word about anyone. His military service in WWII, he saw as an honor for freedom and country. If bad memories were there, he certainly had better things to think about. It’s quite a joy to walk into a care center like White Pines and see such warmth and caring for a man I love and respect as well.

A young woman in housekeeping let me in last Wednesday evening. Her questioning look was, “Who are you?” “I’m here to see Wilbur Rolph.” Her eyes lit up, “Oh, he’s my favorite!” What was it that made Wilbur so special for all the staff at White Pines Assisted Living? Where did his kind and easy going nature come from? What was behind his bright eyes and sweet smile?

Please understand, our brother in the faith would be quick to tell you that none of these qualities or works that he did earned him even the slightest favor with God. ***“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”*** (Ephesians 2:8–10 NIV84) God has already cradled us in His arms by His heart.

Wilbur was one of those humble Christian gentleman who liked to tell me, “Pastor, you make sure my funeral is not about me!” Some have even said, “I don’t want any eulogies.” For these soldiers of the cross there is no honor befitting them, only honor for their Commander, the One who won life’s greatest victory and opened the way to everlasting joy in the presence of God.

The two verses of our text come from Psalm 46 which celebrates our Champion. This was the Scripture for our last devotion a week ago last Wednesday. We had just celebrated the triumph of the Gospel in the Lutheran Reformation the Sunday before. I knew Wilbur would enjoy hearing the Psalm that inspired Luther’s “Battle Hymn of the Reformation,” “A Mighty Fortress is Our God.”

This so clearly describes what empowered and enlightened the life of Wilbur Rolph: ***“Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.” The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah*** (Psalm 46:10–11 NIV84)

“Be Still!” How can anyone be so at peace when he’s been missing his cherished “helpmate” for nearly a decade? How could he enjoy traveling a few times even after Marie was gone home to glory? What made his daughters bestow such care on him that his room always had such a warm and cozy feel? Why was Wilbur always so warm and cozy under those blankets with the little stuffed monkey around his neck? There was more there than the love of family, friends and skillful caregivers. There was love from an outside Source, love that came back to others so we all went away feeling more happy and at peace. Wilbur would gladly tell you why. And he confirmed this with me many times in recent months.

Wilbur Rolph was completely tolerant of others without making excuses for his or anyone else’s sins. What God calls, “sin,” was clearly sin as far as Wilbur was concerned. He gladly accepted God’s expressed will that marriage is meant for one man and one woman for life. So when his married life was ended with Marie going home to heaven, Wilbur continued on. But he was never alone. He believed that God did something far better than to tolerate his sins and shortcomings. Wilbur Rolph was certain that the blood of God’s own Son washed them all away – as promised. And when he received the bread and wine in Christ’s Holy Supper, Wilbur believed that God has the power to give what He says, **“This is my body. This is my blood – given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.”** Wilbur was never alone because Jesus, his best and truest Friend, kept reassuring him, **“Surely I am with you all the days to the gathered goal of the age.”** (Matthew 28:20 literal) Such mercy from God made Wilbur merciful and rightly tolerant with others because he believed what Scripture says that their sins too are all forgiven.

There was no fear for Wilbur. He did not believe in “the survival of the fittest.” So when his time came that he needed care from others, he humbly accepted it – then gave back more joy than he received. Sometimes we hear that Alzheimer’s robs nice people of their kindness. I pray that in my last days, God will give me that Christ like love He gave to Wilbur to still be a blessing and **“still bear fruit in old age.”** (Psalm 92:14 NIV84) **“I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made.”** (Psalm 139:14 NIV84)

Wilbur had a strong sense of identity that rejected the mindless theories of chance mutations and accidental assemblies of atoms in the same location. God gave him the gift of simple, childlike faith. He did not believe the bluster of arrogant minds that cannot draw another breath or have another heartbeat without the God they deny. Wilbur trusted his kind Creator for life and breath. He knew he had become a child of God according to God’s promise **“through the Holy Spirit’s washing of rebirth and renewal”** which was **“poured out on [him] generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.”** (Titus 3:5-7) Rolph believed God’s promise that **“baptism doth also now save us.”** (1 Peter 3:21 KJV)

As the old cowboy sings in Wilbur’s favorite, “Red River Valley,” “We will miss your bright eyes and sweet smile.” But trusting in the same Lord Jesus who saved, then shined on Wilbur and through him to others, we know that no one can take the sunshine of God’s grace in Christ away from us either.

It’s been said that around every corner in heaven there will be a new surprise. God is infinite in His power, infinite in wisdom, infinite in love. Wilbur will be thrilled to welcome all his loved ones home in the Lord. Maybe he’ll save his “Lazarus” sign to stand there with the other two Lazarii when daughters Linda and Diane come home at last. But one thing more that would be an awesome and wonderful surprise, such a great thrill for Wilbur. That’s if someone here today came without faith in Jesus and left trusting the truth of God’s Word. Jesus says, **“I am the Way and the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”** (John 14:6 NIV84) Since **“he died for all”** (2 Corinthians 5:19), you can be certain He died for you. Take that truth into your heart as easily as you would take a little baby up in your arms. Trust in Jesus as your personal Savior and you will receive heaven as a free gift according to God’s many promises.

For Wilbur then, for Wilbur now, **“Be Still!”** is always firmly grounded in Christ alone. Amen.