

Remembering David L. Bartlett

Rev. Dr. Frederick J. Streets

Frederick Streets is former Chaplain of Yale University. He currently serves as Senior Pastor of the Dixwell Avenue Congregational Church in New Haven, Ct., and Adjunct Associate Professor at Yale Divinity School.

All that we say and do here are like silhouettes reflecting just images of our love, respect, and memories of our beloved David Bartlett. More will be written, said and celebrated about him in the future about the good person he was and the many roles as a husband, father, pastor, scholar, teacher and friend he enjoyed fulfilling in his life. We, the members of the Dixwell Avenue Congregational United Church of Christ delighted in David and Carol's presence and we will miss him.

None of us become who we are or succeed in life without the love and support of others. Carol and David were blessed to have one another. Together, the two of them and their family have been and are a source of joy for so many. They have opened their home and hearts to share with others their lives, their humor and wit, their friendship and faith. Friends, neighbors, colleagues, former and current students of David's and health care workers who offered their support to you Carol and your family during David's illness formed a community of compassionate people. They reflected yours and David's sensitive, caring and generous spirit.

We gather here with you to celebrate David's life in the spirit of worship and by giving thanks to God for his having come our way and to be reminded that the broken body and sacrificed life of Christ is also a source for our healing and renewal. It enables us to be a *community of carrying on* (1). Although we know what it is like to lose someone and we can empathize with what it must be like for you now, we also know how private and personal your grief is as a spouse and as children and family members. In the mist of it all we are reminded of the words from First Corinthians, 13:8:

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.

Love defies death. Love can be described, but not measured. I think of the poet's words when I consider with gratitude and deep respect and admiration, Carol's strength, faith and love for David at this trying time in her life:

"I love thee with the breath, Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose, I shall but love thee better after death." (Elizabeth Barrett Browning: Sonnet 43, How Do I Love Thee).

Although we may believe that ultimately it is God's love that holds us and will never falter or weaken, our sense of God's unlimited love for us can seem limited when we witness the suffering and death of our loved one. The scriptures teach us that when all else fails, love never fails and that death itself does not separate us from God's love. The love that feels the pain of David's death is the same love that will live on in your heart and that love and your memories of him we pray will give you strength.

David's work reminds us that although our faith in God may be in size as small as a mustard seed, it is still faith (2). We then live with faith as we also commend David's soul to God and trust that God will one day receive us too as God has welcomed David home. We grieve in our hearts and sing our gratitude for having known him.

We have come to kindle the flame that gave David his passion for living. His devotion to his family, the church and the academy were the threads that were woven into the fabric of his life and preaching. His on-going conversation with God was reflected in his preaching, teaching, prayers, writings and in his humor. I was so touched and reassured by hearing him preach one of his sermons about dying until I somewhat cavalierly but, seriously said to him that I wanted him to preach that sermon at my funeral for the benefit of those who will gather. He responded without missing a beat, by saying "well I would have to change a few things." I replied, "Oh, no, just change the name!"

He wrestled on occasion with God and sought to understand some of the injustices and contradictions of life. He understood that grappling with some of

life's mysteries and questioning the limitations of our faith in God were a part of our fidelity to God. Every person of religious faith comes to those moments when a question has no satisfying answer, when it is difficult to see that sometimes what gives us life first takes our breath away; when all we have is our trust or hope or both our trust and hope that God is with us even when we cannot change what is causing our anguish. We trust in God and believe that the contradictions of life are not final or ultimate (3). So, we are not surprised that one of Davis favorite texts was from Romans 8:

Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We know in our soul that nothing can separate us from the love we have for our beloved and for God. However, we weep when our loved one dies but, only for a night, we cry but, our tears will be wiped by the handkerchief of God's grace. It is a grace that can come; it will unfold over time and through our prayers and by our remaining in search of or being faithful to God and to one another. This enables us to go on with both renewed and a new confidence.

The limitations of life do not limit God's love for us. God has ultimate power even over death - this is our testament of faith in God. This is the hope of all who believe in God through Jesus Christ. This confession of faith was for David, not an argument to be won, or a proposition to be proven. It is a witness and description of how he experienced and reflected upon life of faith.

David was mindful that death comes to us all. His death does not diminish his legacy and the power of faith, the power of hope and the strength of love; preaching for him reflected the preacher's lived experiences and rigorous and careful study of and reflection upon sacred texts and its meaning for the human condition and of hope.

His passion for living, learning, teaching and preaching was shortened by his unexpected illness and death. Each of us has our own thoughts and feelings about

dying. I think David would want us to live as fully as we can and love one another, even our enemies; to oppose injustice and show compassion, especially toward those who experience misfortune of any kind. His life inspires us to believe that we can also make a difference in someone's life and in our community, that the Gospel and its preaching can make a difference in someone's life; between their being crushed by the weight of despair or lifted by the power hope.

David was a good and decent human being. I don't say this lightly: yes, he was kind, and compassionate, a brilliant leader in his field, and a genuinely funny and witty guy. He, as a pastor and preacher, helped us to discern the difference between a heart that was concerned about something from a heart that was troubled by something; he affirmed that the life of Christ offers to us a way to live a meaningful life - strength for our journey, hope in the mist of sorrow and self-worth when we feel devalued!

He lived as long and as well as he could and we are the better for his having done so. Those whom we remember, those whom we love and lose, always live inside of us. Surrounded by his family, as was his wish and determination, he made his transition - really, his apotheosis - from weariness, yes, that is the word, from weariness and mortality to what the Apostle Paul referred to as "putting on immortality". His immortal soul is unfettered and free. He trusted the shepherding nature of God; that God's goodness and mercy is ultimately expressed by our dwelling in the house of the Lord forever.

I think these words adapted by the Reverend Steve Shoemaker of a prayer part of which he attributed to William Sloan Coffin, Jr., also capture the spirit and blessing David leaves us:

May the Lord bless you and keep you.

May the face of the Lord shine upon you and be gracious unto you.

May the countenance of the Lord be lifted up and placed upon you and give you peace.

May God give us grace never to sell ourselves short.

Grace to risk something big for something good.

Grace to remember that the world is now too dangerous for anything but truth and too small for anything but love.

May God take our minds and think through them.
 May God take our lips and speak through them.
 May God take our hearts and set them on fire with
 passion for peace and justice and truth and love.

Amen

Notes

1. Salaam, Kalamu ya. *Our World Is Less Full Now That Mr. Fuller Is Gone*. In, E. Ethelbert Miller's (1994) *In Search of Color Everywhere: A Collection of African-American Poetry*. Stewart, Tabori and Chang. New York.
2. Bartlett, David L. (2005), *Walk by Faith and Wait upon the Lord*. In, Streets, Frederick, Editor, *Preaching in the New Millennium*. Yale University Press. New Haven, CT.
3. Thurman, Howard. *Jesus And the Disinherited* (1949). Friends Press. Richmond, Indiana.