

Sermon at the Memorial Service for The Rev. Donald Williamson  
Christ Church, Andover  
March 31, 2006  
The Rev. Jeffrey Gill

Luke 4:14-21

Connie, Cate and Carlos, Tim and Christina, Ken – let me begin by saying how very much we all share your loss today. There isn't a person in this place that has not somehow been touched by the death of your husband and father. Our hearts are full of love today for you, and gratitude that you have shared Don with all of us. And so please forgive us if we seem to want to claim him for ourselves or speak of him as if the way we knew him was the only Don there was. But I think as we all (even you, perhaps) realize more and more, he was many things to many people. And just how many lives he did touch will probably never be fully known.

Don was a curious mixture of orthodox and unorthodox – orthodox enough to have wanted a traditional burial service, unadorned by eulogies that talked about him, but that offered instead the clear light of the gospel and the hope of resurrection that lie at the heart of the faith to which he so devoted his life.

But he was unorthodox enough to have given his body to science (which we can certainly applaud), leaving us without his body present here today. I'll take some license, then, given that this is a Memorial service, and not, strictly speaking, a Burial service, to do some remembering of the ways in which the gospel is proclaimed in the life of this good and faithful servant of God. Perhaps Don would have appreciated the legalistic technicalities in such a distinction as only an ordained Episcopal attorney could.

The choice of today's gospel had very much to do with Don, and with his life and ministry. What we have read from the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke's gospel defines the call to ministry that Jesus first heard and responded to, and that his followers from that time until now are also called to embrace: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

Had we read the entire story from Luke we would have also heard how unpopular someone becomes who decides to respond to this kind of a call. The words from the Prophet Isaiah were apparently fine as long as they were written on a scroll, kept on a shelf in a nice religious place, but when Jesus said "today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," when he took it upon himself to embody and live out these words, he found himself facing an angry mob that wanted to throw him off a cliff. We like powerful words like these as long as they are tucked away in the safe confines of scrolls or on the gilded pages of sacred books – but when someone says he or she actually wants to do something about them, to live them out, things change quickly. Jesus found himself on the brink of a hill, about to be

thrown over, when in the power of the Spirit, he passed through the midst of them and continued on to Capernaum, never again, as far as we know, returning to his hometown of Nazareth.

Our brother, Don, heard the call to follow Jesus as a young man, to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free. As a son of the South, Don worked even as a teenager to integrate churches in his hometown of Memphis, and he answered the call to *ordained* ministry during the civil rights movement, marching alongside the poor and the oppressed – knowing that he was doing God’s work, because he stood on the side of those that Isaiah had spoken of, and those whom Jesus set out from his hometown to seek and to serve. These were experiences that would inform every aspect of Don’s ministry from that time forward until the day he died.

Like Jesus, Don also figured out that if he found himself on the brow of a hill about to be thrown down headlong because he took the words off the scroll and dared to live them, he’d better have a plan of escape. Don walked through the crowds, not to Capernaum, but to law school. He decided that his ministry could best be lived out like the apostle Paul the tentmaker, as a worker priest, not dependent for his living on the church, not having to worry whether he would have a job in a parish if he stood up for workers’ rights or gay rights. He felt he could serve God and serve the church best, if he were not dependent on it for his income.

Don’t get me wrong: Don *loved* the church – both his own beloved Episcopal Church and the broader ecumenical church that is so well represented here today and which Don also served in many ways. But he loved the church enough not to let it become captive to itself – interested only in maintaining itself, for its own sake, putting a premium on stability, not upsetting things or people. He knew that to follow Jesus, you have to rock the boat sometimes. You’ve got to say things, and take stands on issues, that might be unpopular with people – even with those who have heard the word, have seen it written right there in the sacred scriptures, but who get very nervous when someone wants to actually do something about it.

Don, from the mid-seventies, earned his living as an attorney in government, living out his passion for social justice in very concrete ways – through his work in the US Office of Hearings and Appeals, the US Office of Economic Opportunity, Community Economic Development Agencies, through his work on immigration and refugee resettlement issues, and many other ways.

But Don always had the heart of a parish priest, working often unpaid alongside clergy throughout this diocese, from St. Stephen’s in the South End to St. James’ in Groveland, and many places in between, working tirelessly for Hispanic ministries in our diocese, doing pastoral visitation in homes and hospitals, leading Bible studies and prayer groups, mentoring and advising clergy colleagues, advocating for people on the margins, and yes, often using his legal expertise, too, helping someone navigate a government bureaucracy, going to immigration hearings, or

helping a church file the 501(c)3 paperwork to start a non-profit organization to help teach job skills or teach English as a second language.

Don's independence meant that he never had to hesitate to march for workers' rights, advocate for the right to decent housing or health care for all people, or to fight for equal rights to marriage for all Massachusetts citizens.

Don was as faithful as anyone I know to the charge in the ordination service to care alike for young and old, strong and weak, rich and poor. He combined the passion of the prophet with the heart of the pastor in a way that is seldom seen. One of these roles was not more important than the other to him. Indeed, they were not unrelated, because they both came out of a deep well of compassion and desire to serve God by serving others. The heart of this pastor found him serving at one time or another in nearly all of the Episcopal parishes here in the Greater Lawrence area and some beyond. (We all claim him as our own, it turns out.) It found him ministering to the aged and to young people, going off on a ten day "Journey to Adulthood" pilgrimage, long after most clergy would have delegated such a task to their younger colleagues. It found him at the bedside of others even after his terminal illness had taken hold of him, literally in the days and weeks before his own death. It found him starting a prayer group in a retirement community in Groveland in the final weeks of his life. It found him sitting in a pew, saying his prayers in this church at Evensong on the last Sunday night before his death. The heart of this pastor found him at the time of his own death confident in the consoling words he had offered to so many others even as he faced his own death.

Just a day or two before Don died and some of us were exchanging calls with updates on our latest visits to him, Bill Dwyer called to tell me that Don was dying. And he said something that was simple but profound. He said to me, "Don is not fighting it. He is not afraid. He is dying like a Christian." I could almost hear Don saying, along with the apostle Paul writing to Timothy at the end of his life, "I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing." (II Tim. 4:7-8)

Catherine Rosen pointed out to me yesterday that at the bottom of all of Don's emails was a saying in Spanish – "venimos prestados" – which, roughly translated, means "our lives are only lent to us." Don lived that way, spending the time he had been loaned in the service of others. It was not hard to let it go, because it was not his to begin with.

Today is the feast day of John Donne, 17<sup>th</sup> century priest of the church and scholar-poet with whom Don would have been very familiar, and one who like Don "struggled in his own life to relate the freedom and demands of the Gospel to the concerns of a common humanity... in all its complexities."<sup>1</sup> In words that are familiar to us all, but never more appropriate than today, he famously wrote: "Any

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<sup>1</sup> *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* (1997), page 204.

man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls: It tolls for thee."

The bell tolls for us today. It tolls not to remind us, however, of how diminished we are by Don's death, but of how enriched we have been by his life, and of the incredible hope, yet unseen, that lies in us as it did in him.