

FUNERAL MESSAGE FOR NORMAN CLAIRE KNEELAND

“IF YOU BECOME LIKE A CHILD” – Matthew 18:1-4

Pastor Richard P. Carlson

It is my precious honor and privilege today to preach the Word of God at this funeral for Norm Kneeland who has lived out the truth of the Gospel of Jesus for so many years, and the last five years, has worshipped alongside his wife, Maren, here with us all in our church. They knew most of all the hymns and worship songs we sing by heart. I will never forget Norm's hands raised to heaven with Maren as they sang out in praise to our Lord. I know it often filled Norm's heart with joy and praise to God, to watch Pastor Kevin and Heather lead our worship along with their five sons involved on guitars, the drums, piano, singing, and helping to run the soundboard in the back. Norm and Maren truly have passed on a legacy of musical gifts and talents to Pastor Kevin and to their daughter Jenny Smith, gifts and talents that live in their grandchildren.

A week ago, Wednesday, I travelled out to the Kneeland home south of town in Arrowhead Springs, where Norm and Maren have lived for the last five years. It was a blinding blizzard. I wanted to see Norm one more time. I knew he was slipping away, often slipping into a partial coma, and then coming out again. Pastor Kevin and Heather took me back into Norm's bedroom, where I spoke with Norm and prayed with him, thanking God for this man of God. When I finished praying, Norm thanked me for being a man of God and for what I do. Then he prayed a long, touching prayer for me. I was amazed at how he mustered up strength to pray for me. When I left his bedside, I went out into the other side of the house, to the kitchen, where I listened to Andrew, Caleb, Matthias, Micah, Noah and Heather speak to me about how Grandpa Norm was close to going Home. Andrew told me that nothing in all his life has so imprinted him and shown him the whole picture of life as taking shifts with the family to lay beside his Grandpa, to talk to him, to pray with him, to sing with him, and to see him so valiantly fight to stay alive for his wife and family he so loved.

Truly Norm gave his all to stay alive for his precious wife. He lived to love her, as he cooked for her, cared for her, and calmed her in the storms of life she too has been going through as she has moved into Deer Trail. We circled the wagons, embraced and I prayed for Norm and the family. As I finished praying, Pastor Kevin came into the kitchen. He told me Norm asked him to bring something to me. It was a brown devotional book that Clint gave to him, a book he was reading. I was touched by the gift, so I went back in to tell Norm thanks. I thanked him and also told him I rejoiced that he was singing in bed with the family. He said, "I love to sing to Jesus and He loves me singing to Him." I was moved. I hugged him, kissed his forehead, and went out to my car and cried most of the way into town.

I knew it was my last time to see this man of God I love. The text Pastor Kevin and Heather asked me to preach on today is Matthew 18:1-4. We read, "At that time, the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of

heaven?” And calling to Him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn/repent and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” For a few moments, I want each of us to examine our hearts and listen to Jesus’ criteria for entering His kingdom. He tells us we must repent and receive Jesus, then we must be humble, and lastly, we turn or repent, we must become childlike, like children. Jesus’ criteria for following Norm to heaven when we die, is a three-fold criteria.

TO BE GREAT IN GOD’S KINGDOM, WE MUST REPENT AND RECEIVE JESUS.

(I.) The background of this text is found in Mark 9:33-37 where we read, “And they came to Capernaum. And when Jesus was in the house, He asked them, “What were you discussing on the way?” But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. And Jesus sat down and called the twelve. And He said to them, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” And He took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in His arms, He said to them, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives Me, and whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him who sent Me.” In Matthew 18:2, Jesus said, “Truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven.”

The word Jesus used for turn is the Greek word **strepho**. **Strepho** means to turn around, to reverse directions, and be converted. The disciples were on the perilous road of wanting earthly greatness—they wanted positions of power. The way we all are on from birth is to push our way to the top. We want our own way. Like sheep, we go astray. Many people speak of knowing God and pray to Him, but never turn around. They never do a 180. They never give up their own way—the way from below—the desire to control, the desire to get our own way, the desire to be first, the desire to manipulate events to reach our goal. This way from below is the way of the world. We lean on our own understanding. We try to put our plans into Jesus’ mouth, when converted followers of Jesus have His Word in our hearts.

Norm was converted. At age 12, almost 13, he left behind the way of the world. And when he got back from military service, Norm rededicated his life to Jesus. He turned from pride, prestige, pomp, pleasure, and personal ambition to follow Jesus. He truly repented. Norm rejected following the world’s way. He could have. Like cream, he rose to the top. He was a hero for his family and grandchildren. He was a Marine, a battalion chief firefighter, and an administrative pastor for 15 years with Dr. Jim Hayford in Bothell, Washington. But if you knew him, he never bragged about his achievements. Rather, he quietly and strongly showed the kindness of God as a faithful husband, a loving father and grandfather, a genuine friend, and never a man seeking to push others down to get his own way. The way of the world is to push others aside to surge to our goals. Even in Norm’s hard-fought battle with kidney failure and heart failure, it was evident; he had turned from the way of the world. He had repented of following the controlling ways of the world and he had received Jesus. Jesus said in Mark 9:37, “Whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me, and whoever receives Me, receives not

Me, but Him who sent Me.” Norm quietly showed to us all the beauty of Jesus. He turned and he kept turning from the world; there was no turning back. There was never a doubt in anyone’s mind whose side Norm was on. Secondly,

TO BE GREAT IN GOD’S KINGDOM, WE MUST BE HUMBLE. (II.) Jesus said, in Matthew 18:3-4, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn/repent and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” Jesus wasn’t talking about becoming childish, but childlike. Children are humble. We hold out our hands to them, clap our hands and they come running and jumping into our arms. They long to be held. They long to be loved, accepted and to love. They long to be forgiven when they fail. They long to be taught. They long to belong. Those like Norm who really come to Jesus, drop their proud defenses, and run to Him for salvation. Augustine, that great Christian of the 4th century, was once asked, “What are the most important things about the Christian faith?” Augustine said, “There are three. Number one, humility. Number two, humility. Number three, humility.” There's nothing more important than that!” Norm was a model of humility. Oh, yes, he had many stories to tell about trapping for furs, training in the military, firing surface-to-air missiles, fighting brush fires on the California coast, but in all those stories, Jesus was the center, and Jesus got the glory. I remember ten years ago hunting with Norm and Andrew and Caleb. We stayed three days in the Elk Mountain Cabins. We never got our game, but we had so much fun. We didn’t compete. He made some meals and so did I. He took devotions one day, and I another. Even when we thought we were onto fresh elk droppings and were waiting for a shot, something happened that tested us all. Dogs came running on a trail, as lion hunters treed a lion, and it ruined our hunt. We each were cold, and we smiled at each other that God was sovereign and we hoped the lion hunters were successful.

Augustus Toplady, the writer of the song, “Rock of Ages” wrote about the humility of a true believer. That humility is of a believer who has no plans to get our own way, achieve our own goals, but a believer who rests in the will of God. He wrote, “Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling, naked come to Thee for dress, helpless fly to Thee for grace, foul, I to the fountain fly, wash me Savior or I die.” One thing to watch for when we assess a person's spiritual fitness for ministry is how he or she relates to children. Put a child in the room and watch. This is what Jesus did with His disciples to make his point. Children are the litmus paper to expose the presence of pride in us, and the lack of humility as we want children to be seen but not heard. Jesus tested His disciples by allowing parents to bring their little children for Him to bless, to expose their pride. The disciples rebuked the parents bringing their children to Jesus. In Matthew 19:13-15, we read, “Then children were brought to him that He might lay His hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, but Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.” And He laid his hands on them and went away.”

Norm was at home with children, and his grandsons, Andrew, Caleb, Matthias, Micah and Noah ministered to him by taking shifts laying down on the bed beside

him, praying with him, singing to him, loving him, and Grandpa Norm must have almost thought he was in heaven before he died, as he was showered in their love. No wonder Dr. Jim Hayford called Norm to be his Pastor of Administration. Why did Norm leave his high paying job as a fire chief in California, to go shepherd God's flock in a Foursquare Church in Bothell, Washington? It was because life for Norm wasn't about money, a top position, or recognition. Norm knew better. He chose the way of the Lamb, the way of weakness. Norm knew what a call from God was, and he humbly esteemed a call from God as a call above all others. Dr. Jim Hayford told his flock, "If I take the job as your pastor, I have one request. I want you to call Norm Kneeland to be our Pastor of Administration." In a letter sent last Saturday, Dr. Jim Hayford told Pastor Kevin, "Your father was the most Christ-like man I have ever known." The first criteria to be great in God's kingdom is to turn from the world, the way of power and control to God's way of power in our weakness, the way of the cross, the way of the Lamb. The second criteria to be great in God's kingdom is to be humble and Christlike as Jesus was. Thirdly,

TO BE GREAT IN GOD'S KINGDOM, WE MUST BECOME LIKE CHILDREN.

(III.) This is the crowning criteria Jesus gave. It was so counterculture then, and it is just as counterculture now. When Jesus called these children to him, the child He placed before the disciples demonstrated exactly what Jesus meant. This child trusted Christ. This child sensed the openness, warmth, care, and love of Christ. Children are trusting—they believe what we tell them. This child surrendered himself to Christ. He was willing to give up whatever he was doing to go to Jesus. Before his parents brought this child to Jesus, he may very well have been playing with his favorite toy. But when Christ called him to Himself, he dropped whatever he was doing and came to Him. The child was obedient to Christ. He obeyed and came to Christ. This child was humble before Christ. This child standing beside Jesus became His example for us and what we must do to know and love Jesus. This child trusted Jesus, surrendered himself to Jesus, obeyed Jesus, and humbled himself before Jesus. If any of you today are still walking in the way of the world, the way of control, the way of personal power, the way of "I'll do it my way," God is calling for you. Will you come to Jesus today? He is calling for you to come to Him. Norm asked Pastor Kevin to promise him that at his funeral there would be an invitation for people to humble themselves, to repent and turn from the way of the world, to become like children and receive Jesus into their heart.

A week ago, last Wednesday, I heard and saw Norm Kneeland, when he told me, "I love to sing to Jesus and He loves me singing to Him." What a childlike word that was to me! In 1813, a baby girl was born, Jemima Thompson Luke. At age 28, she wrote a song I close this message with. "I think when I read that sweet story of old, When Jesus was here among men, how He called little children as lambs to his fold, I should like to have been with Him then. Chorus: I wish that His hands had been placed on my head, that His arms had been thrown around me, And that I might have seen His kind look when He said, "Let the little ones come unto Me." Yet still to His footstool in prayer I may go and ask for a share in His love, And if I thus earnestly seek Him below, I shall see Him and hear Him above." Amen.

Invitation to receive Jesus!