***A Good Word for Joel Freuler***

Russ Dean, December 21, 2010

*Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher, and for this reason I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him.*

(2 Timothy 1.8 Amy Jacks Dean used this text for a 2005 sermon, which resulted in the gift of a jade plant from Joel [see her comments from the scripture reading]. Because of this connection, and because the text speaks of the power of individual faith, the text seemed an appropriate reading for Joel’s memorial service.)[\*](javascript:void(0);)

“Still water runs deep,” they say. And anyone who knew Joel Freuler will have known this truth personified. “Still water runs deep.”

Joel was a presence which was often felt more than heard. When we asked his family to tell us about him, the first thing Anna said was, “Dad loved going to church. He’s always been involved.” As I was wrote those words, their truth sank-in. I’m not sure I was aware as much as I should have been. He was, always there, wasn’t he? Always here. Yet as big as he was, as noticeable a figure as he carried, Joel never called attention to himself. He was never obtrusive, loud, presumptuous... But he was always here. And in Joel’s still presence there was a depth which ran through everything he did. I heard this in all the family’s remarks about him, which echo all I knew to be true of him.

Joel’s work as a city planner and a developer required a good mind and a confident resolve. For several years after his retirement Joel read and graded essays from standardized tests taken by public school students around the country, applying careful judgment and even discernment. Still. Deep.

Joel loved to travel. But when his family talks about his trips, they don’t say Hawaii… Caribbean Cruise… Europe and Central Asia… they say, Joel loved the scenic route. And Joel loved Tennessee! Vacations designed for any other destination, than his beloved Rocky Top, just seemed cursed from the outset! He loved the land, so his travel was not the sensational round-the-world type, but the spectacular, local variety. Joel loved the nooks and crannies of the back road. He took the time to “stop and smell the roses.” A trip just up to the mountains to see the leaves could take all day. You might even have to view the foliage by headlight when you finally got there! Joel didn’t want a GPS. He loved the lines on the map, all the connections, all the discoveries waiting to be made. And getting “lost” was never a problem – you just spent the night somewhere and enjoyed the extra day!

Joel was “early to bed, early to rise…” because there is a deep wisdom to that kind of rhythm in life, and in those waking hours, his days were always full, even in retirement. If he wasn’t “putzing around the house,” he was probably reading – and there was little fluff in his library. He loved biographies – his last was the story of our Founding Father, the economist and political philosopher, Alexander Hamilton. Joel read for detail, piecing together as he read the intricacies of our history: Civil War history, American history, human history. In his reading he came to know history as a cycle – a story which has repeated itself time and again, undoubtedly, because too few of our ancestors read as closely as he did. Not being such students of their own history, they were doomed, as the saying goes, to repeat it.

Most Saturday afternoons found Joel listening to the history (as it were) of the quaint mid-Western utopia called Lake Wobegon. He was a fan of Garrison Keillor’s fanciful radio tales of that place “where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average…” Joel loved the show, I believe, because Keillor embeds in his parodies of life some of the deepest truths of human nature. And because he knew, inherently, that all of life’s deepest truths are told in narrative form. The poet Wallace Stevens once noted:

The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly.

Joel understood this, implicitly, and in all of his reading and his listening he was learning the deep truth that comes only by way of Story.

I have said that Joel loved the land, meaning its broad expanse. He also loved its detail. His plants and his gardens are proof that he had spent many a day with dirt underneath his fingernails. All gardeners possess a kind of quiet strength, because growing things requires a certain sensitivity, a connectedness to the stream of life that courses through all things, to the Life that runs deep below the surface of our very shallow culture. Joel composted before composting was cool. He was organic before organic was in. He recycled before many people knew the word. Because there is a deep wisdom that often get lost in shallow arguments – a deep wisdom to being conscientious with the earth. Reducing… reusing… recycling… Living within our means... recognizing the earth as “*the Lord’s…*”, and learning to be good stewards of “*the fullness thereof”* (Psalm 24.1) stewards of this, our most important inheritance.

There was always a pet (or three!) in the Freuler household, because Joel was a little like Dr. Dolittle: he could talk to the animals. He loved to take Onyx on those meandering trips to the mountains, and he loved bird watching. Again, it speaks to me of the quiet depth of his personality that Joel had a way with animals. How a person relates to the natural world, and the animals in it, is a window into his soul.

In the Freuler living room a lush, healthy plant grows by the light of that large, front window. “We bought that on our honeymoon,” Fran said. I just stared in amazement. That plant which has survived since the days of the Carter Administration is more than a testament to his gardening touch, it is also a symbol of his love for his family. Joel cared about things that matter – and he cared for them, as well.

They met in a common work place, and for the next 34 years Fran and Joel shared a life. They raised three children, supporting them with loud, vocal encouragement on the sports field (maybe this was the only place Joel’s presence was heard more than it was just felt!), and they nurtured with quiet affection at home. Fran says he could be hard on his children, but I guess if gardening is the metaphor, pruning is part of the picture! Anna said her father just wanted the best for them, and when she’d come home knowing she hadn’t made the grade she could have, after her nervous talk there was always a big hug and his encouraging words: “Do your best next time!” I suppose many of our experiences with fathers are mixed with those expectations and that forgiveness, the hard outer edge, the soft inner heart. It’s love, with real world wrappings. Still water runs deep. True, also, with a father’s love.

Usually it’s the last question we ask when we gather with a family. I didn’t really have to ask it yesterday. “Tell me about Joel’s faith,” is the question, because families generally tell all the stories first, they laugh and they cry – and then the preachers ask about religion! But Amy noted yesterday that in more than 100 funerals, which we have planned and conducted in the last decade, this is the only time that the family’s very first comment was about faith. Where we began is where we will end. “He loved his church.”

Like the rest of his life, Joel’s faith was Still... but it ran deep. The Psalmist said “*Deep calls to deep*” (Psalm 42.7), and through his gardening and his animals, his probing intellect and his relationships, his attention to things that really matter, the depth of his soul was speaking, calling out to the depth of God which Joel Freuler found running through all things. Paul says that deep truth is from the beginning “*grace… given to us… before the ages began…* (It is grace) *revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus…*” and it is grace which has been revealed, again, in Joel Frueler’s still, deep living.

When he began his experiment at Walden Pond, Henry David Thoreau wrote:

I went to the woods because I wanted to live… deep and suck out all the marrow of life… and not, when I came to die, discover I had not lived.

Joel had endured seven surgeries, surviving a brain tumor and a life-threatening car accident. He faced each of those anxious moments with a calm, steely resolve. Each time his faith led him through. Last week, through this eighth surgery. family and friends hoped and prayed, again – this time for a ninth life. And in the faith that was Joel’s, we trust, even today, that life has come. Befitting the life he lived, it is a life he lives, Deeper Still, in the blessed hope of the forever presence of God.

“I went to the woods because I wanted to live… deep…” 70 years. Still. Deep.

For Joel Freuler, thanks be to God!