

A Good Word for Bob Lonon  
January 15, 2013  
*Proverbs 22.6; Isaiah 40.28-31; John 11.25-26; 14.25-27*

When I received word that Bob Lonon had died in a Carolinas Medical Center hospital, I sent word to a few of his close friends at Park Road. A near instant email message was returned that said, “I think it was JFK who wrote a book entitled, ‘Profiles in Courage.’ ...the title applies to Bob Lonon, one of the most courageous people I've ever met. Many hours spent with him revealed only a positive outlook in the face of extreme difficulties. One of my heroes!” If Buck Blankenship sings your praise with words like those, you can rest assured that you have done something well. On this day – and forever of days – Bob can rest. And rest assured, that he did well. Bob lived well. And Bob died well.

When we first met Bob almost 13 years ago, the wheel chair that was his constant companion bore a small sticker, right on the back. It was a while before I noticed it, and it took even longer for me to understand it, but the message it carried was Bob Lonon, through and through. It said, soberly, “It’s a long, slow, miserable death!” While that would not appear to be funny to anyone who spent nearly 27 years confined to a motorized chair, it shines a light into the soul of one the most intrepid creatures to whom God ever lent that divine image. Bob could have given up after a motorcycle accident took the freedom of the open road away from him. He could have turned bitter at the loss of his limbs. He could have turned his back on family. He could have rebelled against God. He could have recoiled into a justifiable stew of self-pity.

But Bob laughed. At life. At the loss most of his mobility, and all of his personal dignity. he laughed at comedy; he laughed at irony – and he laughed at death. Amy and I visited Bob three days before he took his last breath and the wry smile was still on his face, that devilish glint

still in his eye. I think Bob knew his journey was nearing its end. But even with that prospect before him, Bob Lonon laughed.

And Bob was not the only one who laughed. One of the gifts he gave to those who were graced by knowing him was the gift of laughter. Instead of being uneasy around Bob, not knowing what to say, how to handle his misfortune, Bob put people at ease. When I asked his family to tell me some Bob stories... his sister Julia just burst into laughter! A chuckle went around the room, and someone said, "The x-rated ones or just the stories you can tell in church!?" someone said. There was a gritty reality about Bob. A no-holds-barred, bare it all, "just the facts, ma'am" kind of integrity to his living – maybe living for so long *in the shadow of death* will do that for you – but there was no patina of piety, no thin glaze of prudish polish over Bob's life. Life was what it was. And if you didn't want to know, you shouldn't ask. (And sometimes he told you even if you didn't ask.) I don't know what he was like before 1986 – but I suspect he was the Bob Lonon I knew – all Bob, all the time.

There was exuberance in Bob's living, and always a slightly mischievous bent. As a child he cut his sister's hair one day – including her eye lashes. And he cut the cedar tree out of the neighbor's front yard one December. Looked like the perfect Christmas tree to Bob! The full-bore passion that fueled his mischief also fueled a successful athletic career. He was a three-sport athlete in high school until he blew out his knee on the gridiron. Undoubtedly, it was that can't-get-enough-of-life drive that led him to the motorcycle. Freedom. Thrill. Rebel yell. (Sometimes it was a rebel whisper... but the rebel was always there.) And he loved it. If you asked Bob the first thing he would do if he could walk again, he'd tell you... he would ride. Every time I

visited, he checked in with me. “You been on that Harley lately?” If I said no, he’d chastise me a little... “Get on the bike!”

Bob wasn’t just a free spirit, though. There was a measured, exacting side to his out-of-the-box personality. It found its home in a career of architecture and construction. Bob didn’t have a college degree. Didn’t need one to be as good a contractor as you could find in Charlotte. Bob’s eye for design, attention to detail, and demand for precision are evident in the homes that bear his signature. He has designed and built many homes in Charlotte, including his own home and that reincarnation of “Fat City” – the Lake Norman heaven for a family at play.

They loved to go there. First there was just the lot. Then there was a floating dock. A mobile home then satisfied creature comforts until the accident. Afterwards, Bob re-designed paradise to accommodate the chair. There are no memories for the family like those that call “Fat City” out of the gray recesses of the past and into living color. Skiing. Pontooning. Being together.

Though the accident slowed Bob’s mobility, nothing could squelch that free spirit. He still traveled. He loved to go to the beach – even when it took a construction-style scissor lift to get him into the place. There was no stopping him.

During his recovery, Allen Laymon (then pastor at Park Road) visited Bob. Allen tells me that Bob was suspended in a bed, upside-down, when he walked into the room. “Who are you?” Bob spit. “Your religious conscience has come to pay you a visit,” Allen retorted. They got along just fine after that! Not long after that introduction Bob came to visit Allen, who had been dreaming about a place for the growing number of children in this congregation to play, a more

adequate place for families to share Wednesday night fellowship dinners, a place for a host of programs for adults. He had been dreaming of a building that would accomplish all of that. You might call Bob's visit providential. "Get in," Bob said – and that day, and on many others after it, the pastor and the architect drove around looking at Family Life Centers. The Community Center where we will gather in a few moments is a result of those trips.

Bob was determined to help Park Road Baptist Church expand its reach. He has done just that. This campus is a buzz of activity because of that room: church functions, inter-faith gatherings, community meetings, basketball practices, dances, concerts... you name it. Thanks to Bob. Thanks to Allen. The community center is a reality. It is brick-and-mortar – the structure itself is an appropriate tribute to Bob, the builder – but the brick-and-mortar is just an incubator for something much deeper. When people gather in that building, they are being nurtured in faith: *heart, soul, mind, and strength*. The spiritual impact of those gatherings cannot be measured. So it was with the spiritual depth of Bob Lonon's faith. It was not always visible. It was not loud. It was never pompous. It could be a little rough around the edges. But there was no pretense to Bob's life – why should there be any in his faith!? Maybe that can be the beauty of a debilitating accident. There is the outer building – but within, something much deeper, much more important.

The Community Center at Park Road Baptist Church will always stand as an appropriate metaphor for Bob's life and his faith, a tribute to his strength and his passion. He was raised here. He ran these grounds as a child. Earned the first Eagle Scout rank in the church's troop. Met Jesus in Sunday school and youth group. Was immersed in the warm waters of baptism. And then all of his passion took him away, for a while.

You can take the boy out of the church – but taking the church out of the boy, well, that's a different thing altogether! The old sage said it right: *Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray...* (Proverbs 22.6). Call it a road trip – but, Bob came back!

And because of his life and his faith we gather this day to celebrate. Bob lives. *Whoever believes in me will never die...* (John 11). Bob lives in those of us who were touched by his rare courage, his raw approach to life, his ready enthusiasm. And Bob lives today, tomorrow, and forever, in the heart of God, who was and is the source of his life. *They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint* (Isaiah 40).

He was a man of strength, wit, wisdom, dedication, faith. For Robert Clayton Lonon, a profile in courage – thanks be to God!