

The Park Road Pulpit  
*Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church*  
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***A Good Word for Bob Richardson***

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Just a few hours before Bob died on Saturday, we gathered around his bed for a prayer: his wife, a deacon and another close church friend, and one of his pastors. That unbroken circle, itself, speaks poignantly about his life, and it will remain an appropriate, final image of him in my mind. Bob Richardson, a quiet but sure presence in the center of a circle of God's gathered people, hands and hearts joined in Christian love and devoted care for one another.

I began that Saturday evening prayer by giving thanks for this servant who had *loved God with his whole heart and soul and mind and strength* – for all of his life. I was not trying to be overly magnanimous, flowery or eloquent. I don't appreciate after-the-fact eulogies that paint rose-colored portraits of the saint everyone knew not to be – but there was nothing overstated about my words. In the ways that we human beings can give ourselves wholly to anything, if anything of truth can be said of Bob Richardson's life, surely it was that he did just that. I don't know anyone about whom I could more honestly say had lived seeking to love God with his whole being.

Bob loved with his heart. He was a man of passion. Bob was quiet, but quiet streams run deep, and his loves were strong and true. He loved fine music and a good book. He loved his work, his church, his family. And his romance with Sandra weathered with the beauty of age, but only grew stronger through the years. Sometimes teenagers have to be reminded that public displays of affection need to be moderated. It's not always comfortable to be in the presence of such love, and I often had a sense in being with Bob and Sandra that their affection, while never inappropriate, was often palpable.

Bob loved with his soul. He had studied biblical theology and human psychology and sociology, and he understood that beneath surface appearances and protocols and dynamics were deep, unseen influences, tides measured by primal forces and the irresistible tug of Spirit. His awareness and wisdom made him a man of great conviction – and he was not afraid to express those convictions, even when they conflicted with the opinions of his pastors!

Bob loved with his mind. He was a pastor at heart, but a scholar by instinct and training. Seven years ago he brought a book to my office and invited me to read it. It is one of my great regrets that it fell to the bottom of the stack behind my desk, and I never got around to it. Just before Bob's heart surgery I pulled out this unpublished work to which he had given so much research and labor, and I told him that I had started re-reading *The Unfolding Drama of the Bible, an approach to Christian theology*. It's not light, bedtime reading, but I have made a commitment that it will not gather dust this time.

And Bob Richardson loved with his strength. The effort this book took him is a case in point. Whatever Bob did, he did with a consistent dedication. We changed our church's leadership structure with our last long range vision, and no one has ever come close to doing the work of a Ministry Area Coordinator as Bob did. Someone told me after they learned of his death that it just didn't seem right that he was gone. There was something about Bob, they said, that seemed timeless. I think that's brilliant, and just right. Like "Old Turtle" of that beautiful children's book, Bob was steady and faithful and sure, and his consistent presence was a wisdom we took for granted, a wisdom that will be missed.

*And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength, and you shall Love your neighbor as yourself.*

Just like Bob Richardson did.

May it be so!



## Invocation

Gracious God, giver of life  
Be now our teacher in death  
Our teacher by death

For there is no life that is not touched with this suffering and this final and complete cessation  
There is no resurrection that comes without passing through that  
Deepest, dark valley

We are uncomfortable with the idea of it, so unnatural death seems to us –  
Even though it is surely the most natural part of our living

We don't speak of dying  
We call it "passing away"... "going home"

We don't plan for it or prepare (maybe our wills, but not our hearts)  
We hope for medicines and machines that can conquer this final enemy  
And we are surprised and disappointed when they fail

And when it finally comes, death, we make it antiseptic  
At gravesides we cover the open ground and the turned up dirt  
With artificial grass so we don't have to touch that moist hummus  
To which we are all bound

This day we celebrate the life of Bob Richardson  
But not apart from his dying

He lived well  
And he has died well  
In struggle of this earthly life  
And into the hope of the eternal life to which his God called him.

So we grieve and we acknowledge that we can only celebrate  
The hope of heaven when we have known the tears of this earth

So gather in our grief even as we pray together that prayer that your servant, Bob Richardson  
Knew so well, saying... Our father...