

Eulogy for Keith Clyde Starnes
August 3, 2005

I knew Keith Starnes as well as I've known anyone for whom we've conducted a funeral service. It's so interesting, and such a privilege, to sit down with a family to share memories about their loved one. Often in our position, knowing folks primarily through brief conversations at the door on Sundays, we learn a lot about them when they die. It is often only then that we get "the real story." (You know, the Keith they knew.) As we sat down with this family on Monday evening, I took pages of notes, and you know what? There was not a single surprise in that ninety-minute conversation. What I mean is the Keith Starnes they have known for more than half a century is the very same Keith Starnes who presented himself with a bright smile, a strong handshake, and a compliment to his pastors every Sunday morning.

I did learn that Keith preferred to be called K.C. "Keith" had a too-formal ring about it, so let me spend a few minutes telling you about K.C. Starnes. The K.C. Starnes his family knew. The K.C. Starnes you knew. – The K.C. Starnes who was the man who was always who he was.

K.C. Starnes was salt of the earth. He was the man of that generation that Tom Brokaw called the greatest. The moniker is not always deserved, but it certainly works for K.C. Raised in rural Lancaster County, South Carolina, he had little as a child. Like many of that depression era, one of K.C.'s lifelong goals was to give to his family what he did not have. For some, this has meant only giving them material things. K.C. has certainly done that, but there was more to his desire than just materialistic gain. K.C. wanted for

his family a happiness, a security, a promise for a future that was no sure bet for a poor Lancaster County boy raised in the 1920's. No surprise there. I thought so.

K.C. built this success for himself through sweat and determination. A lot of good old-fashioned "elbow grease." Though he did not finish high school, he worked diligently and later completed his equivalency. Had a sharp mind, an architect's eye. In another place and time, he might well have been an honor student with a post-graduate degree, but K.C.'s diplomas were more humbly earned and more modestly displayed. He could fix anything. There was no job he could not do. And no job that he set his mind to that he did not do. In 1966 he began work on the shop that became his pride. I was fortunate enough to be able to tour his facility a few years ago. That day stands as one of the great moments of my ministry here. Seeing the pride on K.C.'s face spoke volumes to a pastor. He told me that day how many cement blocks were used in the construction of that shop and how much he paid for each one. (I am not kidding.) For forty years K.C. Starnes and Sons Auto Body Services, Inc. has been the source of his business success, the tool through which he raised his family ("Raised them Right" as Amy said at the graveside) and secured for them that future that he was not guaranteed as a child. K.C. Starnes lived the American dream at its best. No surprise there. I thought so.

My grandmother used to say, "let me learn you something." I always loved that expression. "Learning" someone how to do something is a more hands on discipline than just teaching them. I think this way of knowledge speaks of K.C., too. He did not come by his success because anyone taught him anything, but because others "learned" him and he "learned himself." His sons know as a familiar refrain K.C.'s frequent references back

to some manual or book that he had devoured. If he needed to learn how to do something, he bought the manual, read the detail, and “learned himself” how to do it.

When they had successfully accomplished some new task he would tell them, “There, you just earned yourself a diploma! Make yourself a piece of paper and tack it on the wall.” K.C. wasn’t putting down book learning, which he appreciated, but he knew there was a more practical way that everyone had to learn. If you go down Old Pineville Road this morning you’ll find K.C.’s pedigree, written not on diplomas of paper, but in block and mortar and in the lives of two sons and a host of employees who would all agree that a master teacher had “learned them something” – and not just about auto repair. No surprise there. I thought so.

More than 54 years ago Rosella Elam’s brother introduced his friend Keith to a young girl named Hilda. But a young, discerning eye found his way closer to home, not interested in Hilda, but in her best friend. Rosella says that K.C. “picked me out.” He always did have a good eye, didn’t he – another trait he passed on to his sons! For a golden half-century, K.C. and “Rosey,” as he called her, grew, the *two becoming one* (Matthew 19.5) “for better, for worse, in sickness and in health, till death do us part.” “What will I do,” she said to me, “we did everything together.” “He was always generous to me,” Rosella says. I can think of no better compliment from a spouse. She did the books at home, she told us, because “he’d have given it all away.” No surprise there. I thought so.

K.C. didn’t like for his “Rosey” to ever be sad. Even when dealing with something difficult on the inside, on the outside he kept a smile. He was a protector.

“When I was down,” Rosella told us, “he could always bring me up.” (Often by suggesting that they go out to eat – “How about some fish!?”)

K.C. loved to eat. Food was an essential ingredient in his formula for family, but not because he was a glutton. He taught his boys they had to eat everything on their plate (another lesson that harkened back to a modest childhood). He loved food because it was a great excuse for gathering. Sunday afternoon was always family time, and though it was hard on a mother, Rosella always responded with a meal for the boys – and then for the boys and their girls – and now for the boys and their girls and their boy and girls. K.C. always cut the meat. It’s a role that will not easily be replaced.

Jeanie said she remembers knowing when she decided she would marry Steve. One night she came to the house and Rosella was not expecting her for supper. There was no place set, no chair. “But Paw Paw got up and left the room,” she said. “He got me a chair, fixed my plate, and would not sit back down until I had everything I needed.” He was considerate, generous, a gentleman. No surprise there. I thought so.

It was by that kind of example that K.C. Starnes “learned” four sons more than a thing or two about life. He was a disciplinarian, they agreed, but he never had to do much to discipline them. His look was generally all it took, wasn’t it? Steve paid his dad one of the greatest compliments of leadership I can imagine when he said, “Dad would never tell you what to do, but he would lead you to what you needed to do.” No surprise there. I thought so.

He taught them by example that you can do anything you set your mind to. Tell yourself. Believe it. And then go do it. They describe him in amazing one-word compliments: integrity, friendly, selfless-love, awesome.

It has been said that a man never really becomes a man until his father is gone. As strange and difficult as it may be, Dennis, Alan, Steve, and Casey, he has raised you for this moment, to stand on your own two feet, without him. Though he is gone now from you, you will never truly be without him. You are his pride. His greatest accomplishment. A legacy that he has bequeathed this world that will endure as long as you carry his integrity and determination and hard work and honesty and his friendly smile with you.

Finally, I need to say this about K.C. Starnes. Steve said to me, “You know, my dad was... ‘old school.’” No surprise there. I thought so! I have the greatest admiration and respect for the best of what this means. But for a pastor who is decidedly not old school, K.C. Starnes was a gracious new student. He doubtless did not always agree with my opinions, but his eager mind was always open, always listening, always reading his young pastor’s thoughts and ideas. A world that is ever-new can live with that kind of adherent to old school thinking.

His “old school” convictions and his “new school” willingness to learn and be challenged and to grow may speak the most for who he was. I believe it is a combination that can come only from God. For the Spirit of God has always moved, doing a *new thing* (Isaiah 43.19), making *new creatures* out of old (2 Corinthians 5.17), bringing order out of chaos, light out of darkness (Genesis 1). And, even now, life out of death.

You see, what his family knew, you knew too, and he taught me in five short years – K.C. Starnes was, above all, a Child of God. No surprise there. I believe God thought so, too!

Thanks be to God for Keith Clyde Starnes.