

Funeral: Jim Clayton

Isaiah 61:1-3

Psalm 139:1-11

Revelation 7:9-17

John 11:21-27

Maybe you're one of the ones
who used to shop at
JJ's men's clothing store.
You got measured, fitted,
and dressed to the nines
by a tall, dapper man
with a dark mustache
and a winsome smile.

Or maybe you're one of the ones
who went through seventh grade
feeling all the anxiety that comes
with being a pre-teen,
but you knew when you got to math class
there would be a teacher waiting for you
who was kind, funny, and fair.

Or maybe you
got coached
in tennis,
or basketball,
or football.

Or maybe you're just one of the ones
who got a thrill
every Friday night
when we'd all gather at Brodie Field,
under those Friday night lights,
and hear that rich, baritone voice
sound across the county:
"Heeeeeeeere come the Devils!"

Oh y'all.
How blessed we are
to have known Jim Clayton.

* * *

They say that in all of literature,
there are really only two stories:

a man goes on a journey,
or a stranger comes to town.
Well in 1976 a stranger came to Tifton,
and our lives have never been the same since.

There's so much I could tell you about Jim,
but you already know most of it!
Jim's life was an open book.

But the one thing
we've all heard over and over
since Jim passed away
is that Jim Clayton
was a
true
Southern
gentleman.

Here was a man who
took interest in people,
who made time to speak
to everyone he met,
no matter where he was.
One of his boys told me,
"Dad could be in a convenience store,
and he would talk to 15 out of the 16 people there,
usually for 30 minutes a piece!"

Here was a man who,
when he knew of a single mom
trying to make ends meet,
he brought toys, games, and puzzles
for her to give to her children.

Here was a man who
ironed his shorts
before he went outside to do yard work!

Here was a man
who loved his church,
who loved his family,
who loved his community,
and who—even when he was in full decline with Parkinson's—
took the time to ask about *you*
and how *you* were doing.

Last night
one of Jim's daughters-in-law told me,
"Jim was wise,
and kind,
and funny,
but on the softest level."
She said,
"When I met him for the first time, I thought,
'This is the sweetest thing I've ever come across.'"

And how could Jim not be sweet?
They say he had a sweet-tooth a mile long.
He was the kind of guy
who only drank sweet tea,
and he knew *exactly*
how many Tootsie Pops it took
to mow the lawn.

* * *

Our reading from Isaiah today
speaks of those
who will one day be called
"oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord,
to display his glory."

Somehow that image
of a wise, tall, oak tree
fits Jim to a T.
With its wide, outstretched branches
and its sturdy, deep roots,
that image evokes such a strong sense
of family, stability, and welcome.

Jim *loved* his family—
all parts of it—
and while most of the family stories
are theirs to tell,
there is something wonderful and fun
in hearing about how
Jim used to take little Susan with him
to the press box on Friday nights
and bribed her with Coca-Cola and peanuts
to keep her quiet
as he announced the game;

or how Susan's very *first* paper in school
was about how she wanted to grow up
to be a football announcer,
because all she knew was that
when her daddy spoke,
the crowd went *wild*;

or how Jim created this elaborate bedtime ritual
for his twin boys Jim and John,
hoisting them up on his arms,
each one dangling and touching
the ceilings and walls on their way to bed—
a playful kind of nightly house blessing—
before hurling them into their beds
with a kiss on the noggin
and a hug around their necks;

or how when new kids and new grandkids
came into his life,
he played with them in the yard
and yelled "rainboooow!!!"
every time Austin shot one of his
trademark, perfectly arced 3-pointers.

* * *

All of these things are
wonderful,
and right,
and true.

But I want to tell you something
even better,
even more beautiful,
even more true.

The best part of Jim Clayton
was not even Jim Clayton.
The best part of Jim Clayton . . .
was Jesus.

I don't know how you feel about Jesus,
but I am here to tell you that
Jim Clayton *loved* Jesus.

Jim Clayton could *pray*.
Jim Clayton could *sing*.
Jim Clayton had a hymn on his lips
and a song in his heart
almost all the time.
Jim Clayton *loved* this church,
served this church,
spoke at this church,
led this church,
gave *life* to this church.

In his own
humble,
unassuming,
gentle,
quiet,
steady way
Jim Clayton loved the Lord Jesus,
and with the fullness of his life
he invited you to do the same.

The funny truth is that
Episcopalians are always a minority
in a small south Georgia town,
and I know sometimes our fellow Christians probably ask,
“What *are* y’all?
What do you *believe*?
And what are you *up* to?”
Do you want to know what an Episcopalian is?
Jim Clayton was an Episcopalian.

Jim Clayton loved the Lord.
Jim Clayton loved this church.
Jim Clayton loved this community.
And Jim Clayton loved you.

* * *

But now Jim has run the race that was set before him,
and he now knows what we can only continue
to dream about and wonder.

I love that reading we heard from Revelation
just a little while ago:
the one where John looks up
and sees that glorious train of vagabond saints—

regular folks from every
language,
nation,
people,
and tribe—
all dressed in white
and all gathered to sing “glory”
before the Lamb of God.

Can't you just see Jim there?
Can't you see
that crinkled twinkle in his eye,
that wry smile under that long mustache,
that new white robe shining off his tall, sturdy frame
as he realizes all the songs
that are still to be sung,
all those thousand, thousand people,
still to be greeted, and loved, and met?
(Jim Clayton is *literally* in heaven right now!)

And there, at the center of it all, is the best part:
the One who was so gracious
to give Jim to us for a time on this earth . . .
the Maker and Lover of his soul
who now looks on Jim face-to-face,
forgives him of all his sins,
and says, “Jim, my boy, welcome home.”

* * *

Today you and I gather together
to remember Jim Clayton,
and to praise the God
who had the good humor
to bring such a bright soul into our world.

What more can we say,
than what Jim
and all the saints and angels
are already crying around the Throne?

“Blessing and glory be to our God
forever and ever!
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!”

Amen.