

# Eulogy for Wallace S. Johnson

by Soren Johnson

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Grandpa taught me a lot about preaching, but he never got around to teaching me about eulogies. I wish I had asked him. Not all of the grandchildren were able to make it today, but I'm sure they would attest today to the special relationships Grandpa had with each of them.

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“In the beginning was the Word...” Thus begins Grandpa's favorite and most-preached-upon Gospel, the Gospel according to St. John.

Today we remember and celebrate the life, first of all, of a minister of the Gospel, of the Word. We remember the life of a man who answered the all-embracing call to proclaim the truth of the words of Jesus Christ, someone who said that the “dominant motif” in his life was a pastor feeding the flock of God. Brought up by pious Swedish immigrants, Wallace Sigfried Johnson surrendered himself to the ancient yet ever-life-giving Gospel, which he internalized, studied, meditated and preached upon. I think Grandpa would have found it interesting, but not overly symbolic, that he passed away on the day in the Church calendar when many Western Christians commemorate the disciple James, the first of Jesus' apostles to hand over his life in martyrdom for the faith. As we all know, Grandpa had much in common with the apostles, and they were his primary spiritual companions. Of course, the family gathered here remember first of all their own lifeblood, the son of humble parents, Jenny and Elof, the brother of Esther, the husband of Rachel Oslund, the father of David, Paul, Betty, and Tom, and my beloved Grandpa—a man who I came especially in the last three years to know as a friend, a friend whom I could call anytime, even after nine p.m., when he usually took out his dentures, a man who prayed for me daily, and helped me with everything from theology term papers to sermon preparation to personal guidance in my own life.

I have three early memories of Grandpa that date back to the late 70s, when I was about three or four. My first memory is set in the garden at the Kenosha home. On our hands and knees, Grandpa and I picked the carrots together, and it must have been the first time I pulled such amazing vegetables from the lush earth.

A few blocks from Grandpa and grandma's Kenosha home was a Big Boy restaurant. I recall walking there with Grandpa, and standing, awestruck, before the giant red and white statue of Big Boy.

My third early memory of Grandpa and grandma is sitting together with them at their kitchen table in Kenosha. I remember the devotional “Our Daily Bread” on the table, and Grandpa reading from it each morning. Recently, Grandpa said to me, “If it's in the

heart, you'll have it at the table." And so, from an early age, I was privy not only to the contents of his heart, but also to the Daily Bread which nourished him.

Throughout my growing up years, Grandpa and I went on a lot of walks together during our Thanksgiving visits. Neither of us cared for the Thanksgiving afternoon football games, so we'd don our coats and head off into the streets, where we admired the Canada geese and talked about the oncoming winter.

In recent years, we've both looked back on those walks. 'Oh, we did have some walks, didn't we?' Grandpa would say and smile.

To my brother Derek, who couldn't be here today, Grandpa would always say, "We've got a secret, don't we?" And this was his way of saying, "I love you."

In junior high, I stumbled upon a point of friction with Grandpa. He and grandma were visiting our home, and my brothers and I played a little recital for them on the piano. Derek and Kirk received accolades for their renditions of Chopin and Bach. But when I enthusiastically came to the pounding finale of Scott Joplin's Maple Leaf Rag, a heavy and uncomfortable silence hung in the air. Grandpa and Grandma were nonplussed, and entirely unmoved by the ragtime rhythm. On later visits, Grandpa sometimes asked me with a twinkle in his eye, "You still playing that jazz music?"

With time, I came to see that the cadence of Grandpa's King James English didn't have a lot in common with the jazz beat.

It was not until after college, however, that Grandpa and I struck up a real friendship. Between visits and phone calls, we began to learn and appreciate each other's cadence.

Our conversations developed their own deeply-comforting ritual. Grandpa never failed to pick up the phone within a few rings. Once he picked it up, he'd fumble a little bit with the receiver, and then after a few seconds, he'd say warmly, "Good afternoon," or "good evening." Hello Grandpa, this is Soren. "Well hello there Soren, it's so good to hear your voice."

From there, we'd go on to discuss the weather in Rockford, his own physical state, and the recent visits by family and friends.

Then he'd often say, "So what's on your mind tonight, Soren? Everything going well?"

During a visit, we'd move more freely between the mundane and the serious. For example, once I brought him coffee, and as we sat down to drink it in his room, I began a conversation about the war in Vietnam, and his time in Hong Kong in the late 60s.

"Did anyone in your congregation lose children in Vietnam?", I asked. "I don't believe we lost a one," said Grandpa. "We didn't have young people that age, particularly. Well, that coffee's very good. K-Mart coffee?"

“It’s McDonald’s coffee,” I answered.

“Oh, McDonald’s coffee,” Grandpa said. “Good. No, we had been in Hong Kong for ten months, so we were pretty well acquainted with the Orient and the geography.”

Grandpa had a gracious and gentle way of easing in and out of a more serious conversation.

Once, as we eased into such a conversation, I told Grandpa that I liked his Lazy Boy Recliner chair. “I like this chair, Grandpa,” I said.

“Yea?” Grandpa answered, a smile on his face. “It’s tough, though—you have to wait till the end of life before you can use it.”

After a few years of fairly regular contact via telephone and visits, Grandpa and I could sometimes finish each other’s sentences. When we both came to the same conclusion about something, I’d say, “Grandpa, great minds think alike.” Once he smiled and answered, without pause, “Yea, so they say. But I guess the same could be said of substandard minds.”

I came to admire and love the company of my Grandpa. I came to glimpse part of Grandpa’s person—beneath the surface of his gentle, pleasant, gracious, gentlemen’s exterior, Grandpa commanded a rich interior life, where scripture, hymns, sermons, praise, and prayer freely intermingled.

“Children of the Heavenly Father, Day by Day, My Jesus I love Thee, What a Friend we Have in Jesus, Fairest Lord Jesus,”—these melodies and words punctuated his thoughts and his days.

On visits, once we got settled in our respective chairs, I’d ask him which book of the Bible he was reading. It took me a long time to realize that Grandpa was not particularly interested in talking about the Roaring Twenties, Al Capone’s Chicago, the Great Depression, WWII, or other historical highlights of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Part of Grandpa’s heroic life, of late, was his reading of Scripture despite his clouded vision. “I can’t read in sentences anymore,” Grandpa told me a few years ago. “I can’t see the words. I use a magnifying glass and take it word for word. It’s slow going. It’s very difficult.” Yet as many of us know, Grandpa had so much Scripture stored away in his memory that he usually only had to read the first few words of a verse. Then his memory would supply the rest of the sentence, or chapter.

“The Psalms,” Grandpa told me last year, “are getting more and more meaningful as the days go by. I spend so much time in thought on them.”

Without Rachel, without the ability to read more than a few sentences a day, Grandpa continued to see his own life, his own last days, in the light of the biblical witness. Speaking of St. Paul, Grandpa told me:

“When the Lord intercepted Paul on the Damascus road, he immediately went into the desert. I think it was three years or so he devoted himself to prayer and study of the word, pondering, letting the Holy Spirit bring the truth. So that’s why Paul was able to write a book like Romans. There’s no sense of wavering in what he says. Everything is said positively. We gain that in our walk with the Lord. That’s what I find these days doing for me. I’m almost entirely tied up with the Word of God and things of the Lord.”

I came to see Grandpa more and more as a contemplative. In this, there was a deep continuity between his preaching life, and these past few years. Speaking of his weekly sermon preparation, Grandpa said, “through the week, the Lord brings you insights that have been percolating down in the subconscious, as it were. Sometimes the Lord will bless it in a very significant way....You have to keep yourself fresh and anointed, as we say.”

In the Jewish seminaries, or yeshivas, students learn the Torah by sitting across the table from an elderly biblical scholar. Between them is the Holy Scripture, and they argue, debate, and discuss its myriad interpretations.

This is what Grandpa and I did. And I will miss these discussions dearly. True, our talks were conducted in a more muted, Swedish-style of confrontation, so should I say, ‘non-confrontation,’ but we took different views, nonetheless. From seemingly nowhere, he’d recall the original Greek word used in a New Testament text, and mention how this or that passage laid the groundwork for a particular doctrine. We both loved to wrestle with the parables, which he called ‘windows through which the light comes.’

Sometimes I’d go on and on with my view of the passage, and lose my train of thought. After I had spent myself, Grandpa would say, with his light touch of irony, “Well, you’ve got the whole story.” And smile. Other times he’d smile and say, “Those are big words. It sounds like it’s in the intellectual stratosphere.”

Occasionally I called him the night before a paper was due. I’d be in the midst of a paper on biblical exegesis or systematic theology, and I’d call him up to talk. After catching up with each other’s news, I’d spring a question on him. “Grandpa, you know chapter five in Romans, where Paul...” And before I could finish the sentence, he’d inevitably say, ‘Oh, yes, yes.’ Out came my pen, and I’d hear the cumulative thoughts of a pastor who had meditated and studied those same passages for upwards of 70 years.

At the end of such conversations, Grandpa would often say, ‘Well, Soren, I wish I were there studying with you. If I were a little bit younger, I’d like to go back to school.’

And in a way, Grandpa was with me in school. We raised different questions, but his were freighted with over ninety years of experience. His Bible was worn. Mine was a fresh purchase from the seminary bookstore.

“The Christian life and the Christian faith,” Grandpa told me, “the Christian ministry has always been a living thing to me. It’s not dead or mechanical...No. The Christian life should be lived on the plane of everyday living. It should be so much a part of our everyday life that it isn’t something attached to us or something apart from us. It ought to be so natural....”

Grandpa continued, “I think that if you live close to the Lord, everything speaks to you about him.” Once, Kirk and I kidded him about forgetting his walking stick as he led us to the door. “Oh, that walking stick,” Grandpa said. “I forget it so much of the time. ‘Walk with the Lord and you’ll walk straight.’ Come up again, both of you.”

Grandpa lived his life according to the Law of the Gift—a conviction of total service to others. The Law of the Gift, that says we can only know ourselves by serving others. I learned this in part from him.

He spoke of this Law of the Gift as the handing over of ourselves on the mountaintop. “We can’t live on the mountaintop,” Grandpa said. “We have to live in the valley, partly. When you stop to think of it, everything on the mountaintop has to be grown in the valley, and it’s carried up to the mountaintop by someone else. It’s not really yours until you bring it up from the valley and let the Lord bless it on the mountaintop, I guess.” Then, smiling, Grandpa said, “That’s a bit of mysticism.”

As I wrestled with my own sense of calling, Grandpa was always willing to lend a sympathetic ear. His own call to the ministry he described as “the sun rising in the morning. The dawn,” Grandpa said, “when you see a glimmer of light and then you have more and more light till you have a noonday experience. That’s the way my spiritual life has been. More gradual, and very personal.”

Grandpa’s guidance during the past few years has been a constant, gentle, pointing towards the Lord. “You have your own soul to care for,” he would say. “And I think the closer we live to the Lord, the more he’ll reveal to us of his word and of his will and of his love. So we say, let God lead you. Let God guide you. Believe in his guidance, and put his hand upon your life.”

Many of us here know that Grandpa struggled greatly during the years since Rachel’s death, and his own physical decline.

“I’m wrestling with a problem now,” Grandpa told me three years ago. “Rachel passed away, and here I linger without her, and I don’t feel any sense of usefulness. And it’s a burden on my mind, what God may have in the plan. But, I have to hold onto this--that I’m God’s child and he’s going to work out his will. Someday, we’ll understand. Our quartet in Oakland, California, used to sing a song. ‘I don’t know why all around me, my hopes all shattered seem to be.’ How does the next verse go? Well, anyway, that someday we’ll understand.’

Part of Grandpa's continued ministry took place right here at Fairhaven. Once he told me, pointing to the ceiling in his room, "If I go in the rooms up there (pointing up) just to visit, I always pray first that the Lord will help me to render a spiritual ministry. I can't just go and say 'hello' and 'goodbye'."

Yet Grandpa's 'lingering', as he put it, was an immense blessing in my own life.

At the end of our visits together, we'd come to a part of our ritual which I never really relished. He pronounced each of his good-byes as if it was the last one. He'd often make a graceful and humorous transition from our conversation to the goodbye. "Well, Soren, we've got a lot to think about, if you want to think. Listen, let's pray, shall we?" It was his goodbye, and sometimes, closing prayer—these prayers were deep, eloquent, and smooth-flowing prayers which drew freely from the language of the King James Bible, revealing the ease with which he turned his mind and the minds of those around him towards our heavenly Father. Now I cherish these good-byes. Before praying together, we'd share our requests with each other. His main request was always for 'strength', both physical and spiritual. As a minister of Christ's Incarnation and Resurrection, as one called to administer the visible signs and means of God's grace, Grandpa—in his good-byes—was staying true to his calling and demonstrating his love. In each of them, Grandpa chose to say far more than a mere 'hello' and 'goodbye'. As he put it, he was 'rendering a spiritual ministry'—even in the midst of his own loneliness after the loss of his wife Rachel, the loss of his eyesight, and other physical ailments. It was the Law of the Gift, the complete giving of oneself to others. Blessed be the memory of Wallace, the Lord's humble departed servant—he was a witness to the hope to which we are all called.

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Book of Ecclesiasticus (Sirach 44:4, 10-15)

Now will I praise those godly men, our ancestors, each in his own time;  
These also were godly men, whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten  
Their wealth will remain with their descendants,  
And their inheritance with their children's children  
Their descendents stand by the covenants;  
Their children also, for their sake  
Their offspring will continue forever,  
And their glory will never be blotted out  
Their bodies are buried in peace  
But their name lives on generation after generation.  
The assembly declares their wisdom,  
And the congregation proclaims their praise.  
Amen.