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On Knowing the Way to Go Homily at the Memorial Service for Don Shelton

Romans 14:8 NRSV If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's

Romans 8:35, 37-39 RSV What shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?.... 37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We would give anything if we were not gathered here today for the reason that draws us together. But we were not given that option, and our friend, our beloved-brother-in-Christ Don was not given that option. And since that is oh-so-sadly so, there is in fact no other place that we would want to be today, no other place that we **should** be. It is, as the old, old language has it, then, "meet and right" that we should come to this beloved building, dedicated as was Don's life, to the cause of Christ, joined with this company of folks who loved him and whom he loved, remembering all that he was to us, giving thanks for those countless lives whom he uplifted and inspired, offering our care to one another and to his beloved Linda and Stacy and Shonna, crying our tears together, laughing at good memories, sharing stories and knowing in the deepest places of our beings that all of these things are made good and holy and sanctified in the tender mercies of God.

We have indeed come to this holy place, this holy time, by many roads, many

paths, joined from across the miles and the years. And how we got here today has everything to do with how Don Shelton helped guide us. Let me ask you: How many of you ever had the opportunity to ride somewhere when Don was driving? It was, shall we say, an experience, wasn't it? In fact, in my last telephone conversation with Don, I told him that I hoped that I would get to ride with him somewhere one more time. Some of you, I see, know what I'm talking about. I recall one night, before a Disciples Seminary Foundation Board meeting, that Denny Williams and I were to meet Don at a restaurant. We were already at the restaurant and Don was arriving separately. He had just gotten his cell phone but hadn't quite mastered the art of answering it. So, every so often, my cell phone would ring and it would be Don trying to figure out how to get where we were. *"Where are you?"* I would ask. And Don would say *"Well, I'm on a pretty busy street at an intersection where there are several traffic lights."* Well that narrowed it down. And then in a few minutes, another call: *"I think I'm getting closer."* *"Where are you?"* *"Well, there's a McDonalds on one corner and a Starbucks on the other."* Hmm... You could be in Claremont – or Clovis, given that description. And then the phone goes dead. But soon: Riiiiing. *"I'm almost there!"* *"How do you know?"* *"Well, it just feels like the way to go."*

On another occasion, I found myself in the passenger seat as Don was driving us to a church for some event that I've now forgotten. And Don kept a running color commentary, sort of like having a really chatty and extroverted GPS. *"Well I think this is the right way. This feels familiar. I'm not sure, but I'm feeling like the church has to be that way. This feels like the way to go."* And so on and so on. One just learned to enjoy the ride and we did indeed get there on time and having had a rather scenic tour

of parts of Greater L.A. that I hadn't seen before.

Now, out of some mouths, that sort of phrase, *"this feels like the way to go"* would be, well, gacky and insubstantial and even shallow. But not with Don, never with Don. His "feelings" about the right way to go were indeed almost always unerringly accurate in things both large and small: whether it was finding a destination, or advising a perplexed pastor, or painting the walls of the parsonage of the church in Hawaii where Barbara and I lived and where Don could unerringly find the spots that had been missed, or consoling and comforting those thousands of folks over his ministry in life's tragic moments, or delighting when a young person at Loch Leven found him- or herself held in the tender mercies of God in the midst of life's confusing or compelling moments, or even when he was saying difficult but needful things to the pastors and churches he shepherded as Regional Minister, or when his voice insisted ever and always that racism was evil and needed to be extirpated from our individual and churchly lives. The American philosopher William James coined a phrase that could well fit what so many of us experienced in Don's gift for being able to know the way to go: *"the sentiment of rationality."* Now that phrase is neither so dry nor so odd as it may sound, for James describes it this way: a *"strong feeling of ease, peace, rest"* and a *"feeling of the sufficiency of the present moment..."* It strikes me that these feelings in Don, grounded in his unshakeable faith in God through Jesus Christ, were the same thing that the hymn writer spoke of this way: *"It is well, it is well with my soul."* It is that sense of wellness that indeed was why Don was such a good guide on the way that we should go, why one of the folks at First Christian in Colorado Springs could say this about Don's ability to know which way to go: *"Don was one of the incredible folks in*

my life who ...taught me, empowered me, led me, supported me, moved me, as my life journey has unfolded and stayed placed at First Christian....”

Every one of you here today has a “Don story” about how his ability to know the way to go was a gift to you. It will be a marvelous grace to hear some of those from this pulpit today and to share with one another later in this service. For it is indeed why we gather, isn't it? To offer to one another and to God our stories, our laughter, our tears, our smiles; to offer to and take comfort from one another amidst the hard reality of earthly loss. To mourn what should have yet been and even to express our anger at the unfairness of gathering today when we should have been doing so twenty or thirty years from now. To see in ourselves and in one another just how much we are who we are because of who Don was and to know and celebrate and proclaim that he will live in us in these oh-so-wondrous ways.

It is in the midst of such a complex congerie of feelings that we come together. But I would say it even more strongly: it is precisely *because* of that swirl of feelings that we **must** gather today. We gather as extended family, as friends, as church, to remember, to smile, to laugh, to cry, to grieve. It is good, it is very good, to do so together, to take strength from one another to know that we are not alone. And it is good to do so in this place that meant so much to Don, a place that gave him strength, this place where he was both rooted and blossomed, this place that he loved and where he was loved, where indeed he showed so many the way to go, this place where we almost expect him this afternoon to come through those doors!

But he will not. And the finality of that fact reminds us of the other reason that we gather, the most important reason, and that is this: we gather to be reminded of the

great good news that animated and shaped Don's life: that life with God is life that shall never die. We gather not to be reminded of the mortality of life – for life itself reminds us of that much too poignantly – but to remember and affirm that even though human love is finally fleeting, even though human memory – glorious as it is – is finally of a moment, nevertheless God's love is not fleeting, God's love does not fail, God's memory does not dim, God own life is forever. Don Shelton is now with God. Eternally, safely, forevermore.

For you see, no matter how beautiful a life, no matter how unerringly that life knew the way to go, no matter the influence that life has had in the lives around it, we do know that indeed all human life is mortal and transitory and all that has stood someday no longer will. Human love is beautiful but it is for a moment, and human memory is a treasure but it too fades. So we need to hear this afternoon the gospel of God in the face of our grief, in the face of our mourning, in the face of the reality of one whose earthly life is no longer among us and that gospel is this: God's love is perfectly beautiful and never ends. God's memory is utterly perfect and cherishes all that God has made, redeeming what needs redeeming, and valuing eternally all that has been of value. God is not transitory, but the One whose faithfulness endures forever.

The great 20th century theologian and ethicist, Reinhold Niebuhr, once said that *“Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in [one] lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope.”* The great good news today and every day is that we are indeed saved by a powerful hope, the hope of the gospel, the greatest Good News of all. It was the Good News that Don knew in the deepest places of his being, it was the Good News that made him know that even when our earthly bodies fail unfairly and much too soon, we can

nonetheless rely on God's strength and hope forever. And today we can affirm this: God has now received Don William Shelton into God's own eternal and perfect life; the one who led so well, who knew the way to go, has now himself been led, as the hymn says, "safely home." This afternoon we can say, then, even amidst our tears that are an index of how much we cared for him, even amidst our grief that is the sign of how much we shall miss him, that for the peace and the hope that he has now found we are grateful; for the ceasing of pain and suffering we are thankful. And, most of all, for the good news of the Gospel, we are grateful indeed: For it is true whether in life or in death, we are God's. We do not live to ourselves and we do not die to ourselves. Nothing will separate Don or any of us from the love of God through Christ Jesus. For that reason, we do not and will not and cannot grieve as those who have no hope. For we do, we do, we do. Thanks be to God! Amen.