

**MEMORIAL SERVICE**  
**Joseph Lancaster**  
Wilshire Baptist Church  
11 August 2008, 11:00 AM  
George Mason, Senior Pastor

**Words of Grace and Greeting**

- In the name of the one who said *I am the resurrection and the life; those who believe in me, though they are dead, yet shall they live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.*
- We are gathered here under a dark cloud of sorrow, because Joseph John Lancaster, Jr.—husband, father, grandfather, brother, son-in-law, friend—succumbed to a sadness so deep and impenetrable that he lost hope of its lifting in this life
- The range of emotions felt in this room today stretches deep and wide: from sorrow to shock to anger to grief to guilt to fear to shame to disbelief to worry to wonder
- I can only tell you to allow yourself to feel them all, and as you do to offer them up to the only one who is able to do anything good with them—the God who loves you and who loves Joe even now with an everlasting and unfailing love
- While our minds and hearts will race with remembrances of Joe and questions of why things came to pass the way they have, I urge you to allow the hymns and prayers and words of Scripture to sink into your soul and grant you the peace that only God can give
- Our thoughts and prayers are especially with Joe's wife, Christy, with son Blake, with Joe's daughters Tricia and Ashley, and with many other family members and friends who feel today that a part of themselves has died; and in a way it has
- But wherever there is grief, there is God; and wherever there is God, there is grace; and wherever there is grace; there is gratitude, too. And we shall be looking for that above all today.

**Scripture Readings** John 10:10b-11, 27-28; Ephesians 4:31-5:2a

**Message**

- **On Suicide**
  - Joe, a child of this church, sat in the pews since he was 5 years old, his parents were charter members

- Knew voice of Good Shepherd, numbered among sheep of fold of God, no one and nothing could snatch him out of God's hand
- Yet he died by his own hand
- He shouldn't have. Wrong to do it. No solace in suicide or encouragement about what a noble act it can be
- *I have set before you life and death*, God told the children of Israel long ago. *Choose life.*
- At the last, Joe chose death, though he had chosen life many times before. We are left to wonder where that leaves him with God?
- Some say hell, because suicide is the unforgivable sin. Idea is that one loses all opportunity to confess and so dies with last sin unforgiven
- But Christ died a long time ago to forgive all our sins, even those not yet committed. Confession does not bring forgiveness; it only brings relief to the one forgiven
- God knows how to be just and merciful at the same time: legal system accounts for mitigating circumstances, degrees of responsibility based on capacities
- No excuses for this: Joe gave up, and in doing so passed on to those he loved the most the open wounds he could not heal, the unfinished business of broken relationships he could not mend
- Suicide took away Joe's pain, but it didn't end the pain. It shifted it to others
- Yet that was not his intent. He was clear about that in his notes. He thought he was acting in the best interest of others by taking himself out of their lives
- Thinking gets distorted, unclear. DEPRESSION is an illness that drains the color from the world and saps the life out of you until you feel like the walking dead
- You lose perspective on yourself. Can't see yourself from others' point of view. Feel trapped with no way out
- Knew he was depressed for a long time, in therapy to conquer it, taking medication, trying new drugs
- Realized some things he could not fix, including himself—good place for us to be, but then we should learn grace, not succumb to despair
- God is merciful; Joe was not acting with fully keen faculties

- God does not judge a person's whole life by the last worst decision he makes, and neither should we

- **Larger Picture**

- Joe was larger than life. Huge presence.
- Loved life and loved to see people having a good time
- Orchestrated things with great detail to see that happen
  - Not surprising, he even did so with his death
  - Notes for police who found him showed carefully worked out what they should know—protect others
- Marine. Duty. Intelligent. Thorough. Prided himself on knowing things and sharing his knowledge
- Knew how to make money, how to lose it, how to make it again
- Generous with it, too—repeatedly told this by family, friends
- Money, but also listening ear, advice specific
- Like all, knew both success and failure, love and brokenness
- Thought he and the world better without him, but no one who knew him could imagine their world if he had never been in it, and they cannot imagine their world now without him

- **The Road Ahead**

- Paul says that since God has forgiven us, we ought to forgive one another
- Sometimes we forget that God isn't asking us to do what God isn't willing to do. God decided not to count our sins against us, or even judge us on the basis of them
- God does not hold us accountable for our sins; God holds us accountable for our forgiveness. Heaven is not where forgiven sinners go and hell for the unforgiven. Hell is where forgiven sinners put themselves, and no one needs to go there
- *Forgive Joe*, first of all. Don't excuse what he did. Don't pretend everything he did or failed to do was good if it was not
- But let him go, let him rest in peace now. Nothing left to be gained and so much lost if you hold bitterness, close heart

- *Forgive yourself*, next. Some of you wonder if you had done something different ...as if it were within your power to change things. Even if it were, it is what it is. There is nothing you can do to change that by blaming yourself or anyone else. How will you go on?
  - Bible—forgiveness means *to let be, to let go*
  - Image is holding a dog on a leash. You think you have control, refuse to let go. But leash has two ends. As long as you hold on, you are on the leash, too
  - *Forgive each other*, finally. Do not let one tragedy be compounded into others. Do what you know makes for peace and well-being. Consider all relationships and begin to do your part to set them right
- **Conclusion**
    - Mysteries of human condition we will never solve. But Christ holds us in the palm of his hand and asks us only to heed his voice and do what we have within our power to do
    - What we can do now is thank God for Joe's life, forgive him, forgive ourselves, forgive each other. Then be kind to one another and live in love
    - It is too late for Joe now. God is merciful to see to his safe-keeping. It is not too late for you.

### **Closing Prayer**

Almighty and all merciful God, we commend to you our brother Joe Lancaster. We acknowledge that, like all of us, he cannot commend himself to you as worthy of salvation; and yet we know that nothing can separate us from your love in Christ Jesus. And so we call upon Christ in this hour of need. Hold our brother safely in the palm of your hand. Restore him by your loving kindness, and grant him peace. Comfort now your people here. May those who grieve know the assurance of your forgiveness and grace. Lift from their hearts the heaviness that threatens to sink them, and give them resurrection power to live again now and in due time forever with you in the bliss of your eternal kingdom. To you be glory and honor now and forever. Amen.