

In Thanks for the Life of the Reverend Dr. Donald Edward Grayston

2:30pm, November 15, 2017, at Christ Church Cathedral, Vancouver

Sermon preached by the Reverend Martin Elfert

I met Donald Grayston for the first time at a party almost a quarter of a century ago. And I remember it vividly. Don had this generous, playful, wise energy. And he had a wide smile to match it. You remember that smile: when Don smiled, he opened up his mouth to show an inch or more of gap between his upper and lower teeth. It was a smile that suggested he was on the verge of laughter, a smile that suggested he was about to let you in on a joke, a smile that suggested he was drinking in the beauty of the world. And while Don was appreciably older than most of the people at the party – I suppose he would've been in his early or mid fifties back then, eight or ten years older than I am now – he seemed entirely at home in the youthful spirit of that room.

I don't know if it was that night at the party or shortly thereafter that I learned that Don was a Priest. And that knowledge was an instance of cognitive dissonance for me, of confusion. I didn't have anything to do with church back then, and on the rare occasion when I did think about faith, I reckoned that church was anti-intellectual, judgmental, humourless, and variously obsessed with and terrified of sex. When I read the news or turned on the TV, I constantly saw churches on the wrong side of the great moral issues of our time. What did it mean that someone like Don – who was fun and smart and compassionate – was a part of church? I started to wonder if there was more to faith than I had allowed.

Don Grayston engaged in evangelism, in other words, by being out of the closet as a Christian and by being Don Grayston. He never handed me a pamphlet, never knocked on my door wearing a suit and tie, never gave me a lecture, never asked if I had found Jesus, never threatened me with hell. What he did was to live with enough curiosity and generosity and compassion and joy that, like the woman at the next table in *When Harry Met Sally*, I looked at him and said:

I want what he's having.

I am, in large part, a Christian because of Don's evangelism. When I read the Bible for the first time and I got to the Gospel of John, in which Jesus makes his first appearance at a party, I said:

Oh! Just like Don Grayston!

I met Donald Grayston for the last time just after Christmas in 2016. He was in the hospital, quarantined into one of those rooms with negative air pressure so as to keep germs inside from trading places with the ones out in the hall. I had to wear a mask and a gown and latex gloves when I sat with him. Don was frail and struggling to breathe. The doctors thought that he might have tuberculosis or some other radical respiratory ailment. And while Don subsequently rallied and got to live for most of 2017, using the time for writing and prayer and visits with friends and activism and maybe even a little holy mischief, on that day in December, it looked like Don was within days or weeks of the end of his life.

Maybe it was because of the intensity of his illness, maybe it was because of the location in the hospital, maybe because it was the last time that I saw him on this earth, but our conversation back in December feels in my memory like a farewell, it has the ring of finality to it. What we shared on that day sits in my imagination like a deathbed conversation.

I've thought about it a lot.

There was a time in our culture, a generation or three ago, when we understood the late-life words and actions of a person to be a big deal, to be an important source of wisdom, to be an insight into the holy. We've mostly forgotten that today. We still have the expression, "famous last words," but we almost always use that expression facetiously: "famous last words" is what we say to someone when they explain to you that the mountain bike trick that they are about to attempt is perfectly safe or when they tell you that cutting through the electrical wire that they are holding in their hands is no big deal. Before those words were a joke, however, they pointed at our conviction that what a human being had to say as they neared death mattered.

My guess is our society has forgotten deliberately about the wisdom of the dying. We have forgotten because we are a culture that denies aging and finitude and death. And to pay careful attention to someone at their life's end is to sabotage our denial.

I'd like to see if we can remember this afternoon.

Don was a teacher – not just at Simon Fraser University, not just in his work as a Priest, but across his days. He was constantly teaching. So let's ask: what do the things Don wanted to say as he approached death have to teach us about who Don Grayston was and, just maybe, about what a life well lived looks like? What does the way that Don carried himself in his final year, the way that he was in the world in his last days, have to teach us about who Don Grayston was and about what a life well lived looks like?

What I noticed in the hospital room – maybe you noticed this as well if you had the gift of visiting with Don over the last year or so – was that Donald Grayston, even deep into illness, was without bitterness. His focus was on compassion, on generosity, on kindness. Speaking with him, sitting with him, I was reminded of the poet Hayden Caruth who, late in his own life, said:

“Now I am almost entirely love.”

Don was able to speak without bitterness about his illness. He talked about it in an unvarnished, direct way – I remember the doctor coming in to the hospital room and confirming what we knew, I remember her saying that it was most likely that Don would die in the next year. And Don simply said, “That sounds reasonable.” Don't misunderstand me: Don was sad about his death, he wanted to live more, and I am so sorry that he did not – he would've been an absolutely amazing old man. But his sadness didn't stop him from being almost entirely love.

Don was able to speak in a similar way as he looked back on his life. On that day in the hospital room, one of the big subjects that Don wanted to talk about were his regrets. He didn't feel a need to formally confess any of what we might call sins – but he really did want to sacramentally name, to have a holy context in which to name, his regrets.

And so I listened.

What was amazing to me as I listened to Don was how gently he held those regrets. Here too, Don was without bitterness. His regrets were, like his illness, something that he could hold in his hands, that he could name, that, yes, he could be sad about. But his regrets weren't something that owned him or controlled him or obsessed him or crowded out the joy in his life. He spoke of those regrets with the knowledge, with the faith, that he was infinitely and unreservedly loved by God.

All of his regrets (and when I last talked to Don on the phone, I asked if it was okay to share this with you; he said that it was) were about those occasions on which life or, depending on your lens for reality, on which God had offered him the opportunity to risk more, to love more, to share compassion and kindness more, to become more free and more joyous and more fully alive and to invite those around him to do the same and, for one reason or another, he said "no." Nowhere in his regrets did he talk about wishing that he had bought stock in Apple in the late nineties. Nowhere in his regrets did he talk about how he wished he had achieved fame or worldly power. His regrets were all about the times when he had missed the chance to say "yes" to life as fully as he might have done.

Here is Donald Grayston the teacher. What might Don's late-life words and the way that he was as he spoke them have to teach to you and to me?

Today, we hear a reading from the Gospel of Luke. It is an unusual reading for a funeral – when you leaf through the Prayer Book and get to the part where it suggests scriptural readings for occasions such as this, you won't see this on the list.

But it might be the perfect reading for the funeral of Don Grayston.

Here is Jesus, healing people, feeding them, telling stories. And he is confronted, as he so often is, by a group of hecklers, by people hoping to trip him up, to trap him in his words, to get him in trouble. And Jesus responds by rolling his eyes, by delivering a comeback that is equal parts brilliant and concise and funny.

You gave heat to John the Baptist, he says, because John was a full-on ascetic, because he didn't eat or drink. And now you're giving heat to me because I love eating and drinking, because I am willing share a meal with anyone, no matter how unpopular they may be, no matter how unimportant they may be, no matter how hated they may be?

There is a whole lot going on in these two sentences.

Here we see a rebuttal to the notion that Jesus is radically, relentlessly serious. A lot of oil paintings depict him as this intense, humourless guy. As the Scottish theologian and hymn writer, John Bell says, we know two things for certain about Jesus: he was very thin and he never smiled. But in this passage Jesus testifies to his delight in life, to his delight the everyday, to his delight in food and drink. Sometimes we will say, "God was with us," after we come out of a dark or a hard period – and that's good. This passage suggests that we also might say, "God was with us," in a time of joy or jubilation or celebration.

Here as well Jesus declares that food and drink is something that he is willing to share with absolutely everyone. Everyone is unreservedly loved by God. Everyone is invited to the party that God is throwing. That's good news and it's hard news. It's good news because it means that even someone like you or like me is invited to God's table. And it's hard news because it means that even the person whom you like and respect least in this world is invited to God's table.

In these two playful and wry sentences, Jesus tells us that there is nothing outside of the love of God, that there is nowhere outside of the love of God, that there is no one outside of the love of God.

This insight, this understanding, is something that one mystic after another has proclaimed. The Franciscan priest Richard Rohr tells the story of meeting a hermit who says to him, "God isn't somewhere else." (I have a colleague who has "God isn't somewhere else" tattooed on her forearm.) God is right here, no matter whether here be this church or a home or street or the Downtown Eastside. This understanding was the great moment of clarity for Don's hero,

his spiritual teacher, Thomas Merton. He had his famous vision at the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville, Kentucky in which he understood that everyone around him was just radiating with holiness, with divinity, with the love of God, in which he understood that separateness from God was an illusion.

I think that Don came to similar understanding near the end of his life. Maybe that understanding was the reason that, near the end, he was almost entirely love.

On that day in the hospital room, without bitterness, Don named the story of his life, a story that included his illness, his dying, his regrets. He named the hard parts of his life as one might name the scars on one's body. Here are things that hurt, that maybe are hard to look at. But here as well are things that we dare not wish away. Because these scars, well, they are woven inescapably into our story. Like grief, these scars are evidence of having lived and having loved. To wish them away is to wish our history away, to wish our very lives away. Don had come to understand his scars as his teachers, as something for which, in spite of everything, he could say thanks. In them too, he could see God.

Or maybe scars are the wrong metaphor. Maybe at the end, his life was like words written into a book, a book filled with jubilation and sorrow, with satisfaction and regret, with parties and hospital rooms, with love and loss.

Or maybe that too is wrong. Maybe, to riff on an image from the poet, Mary Oliver, what Don held at the end was a box full of light and darkness and, after all the years, he had come to understand the darkness too as a gift.

That day in December in the hospital, Don held the story of his life in his hands. He placed it on the rectangular table that swung over his hospital bed. We looked at it together. We prayed over it. Then he gave the story to God. And then, with a gap of an inch or more between his upper and his lower teeth, Donald Grayston smiled.