

Funeral Homily for Bill Wainwright
The Rev. Ian Burch
November 11, 2020
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI

I can see Bill, in my mind's eye, sitting right here in this sanctuary, about two thirds of the way back in the pews, on the north side of the church. That is right where he sat for at least these past five years and probably many decades before that, maybe even going back to his joining this church in 1968. He would sit, with his hand up on the side of his face, listening to the prayers and the sermon. And he was always quick with a handshake and a kind word on the way in or the way out. It won't quite seem like the same St. Mark's with Bill gone.

Do you have any idea how intimidating it is to preach in front of a man of Bill's intellect and pedigree? He had forgotten more theology than I would even know, and he knew his bible and his church history just as well. Throw in an expert in philosophy, and you have every preacher's nightmare. And yet, because you know him, you know he was unfailingly kind to all the preachers in this pulpit — to the five rectors he lived through in this community. I will tell you that the handshake and the “nice sermon” from Bill Wainwright was quite a compliment and even more precious for being rare. We are going to miss him terribly.

I have wondered a few times what it might have been like to be a student in one of his classes. I've heard from a couple of people who had that experience that the conversations were just wonderful and that Bill was a man of intellectual rigor and also kindness to learners. That's not always true of great minds.

In a way, though, I feel like I have listened to one of Bill's lectures, mainly because his life was instructive to those of us lucky enough to witness it. His love of God, of his family, of the church, and of ideas — and that little twinkle in his eyes when he thought something was funny. Watching Bill move through this community was a pleasure, and it was a great lesson in what a faithful life can look like.

The Gospel lesson this morning is commonly read at funerals. I think the idea that God has gone ahead of us to prepare a place when we die can be a great comfort. But I have a feeling Bill would have dug into the theology of the passage more deeply than just the parts that give us comfort. Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” This is the meat of the passage — that to follow Jesus on the way is absolutely foundational to who we are. Following Jesus is not just comforting or sweet; it is central to our identity as Christian people. Jesus is our breath. Is our light. Is our essence. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus sits for Christians as the greatest event in the history of the world. And even though it happened two thousand years ago, it happens again every Sunday at church. It happens when we baptize a child, when we marry a new couple, when we break the bread at the altar, and yes, when we bury our dead.

Jonathan Edwards, American preacher and research interest of Bill's, puts it this way, “When indeed it is in God we live, and move, and have our being. We cannot draw a breath without his help.” Since the earliest of the apostles, the church has taught that God is in the center of everything — our worship, our vocation, from sun up to sun down. And great thinkers and

preachers over time have echoed this theme. The trick, the great theologians will say, is that no matter how central we think we have put God in our lives, God has put us central first. No matter how much we love our God, God has loved us first. How lucky we have been to see a man live this ancient truth right here in the midst of us all these many years.

We are going to miss seeing Bill in his spot. I'll miss shaking his hand outside the church each Sunday morning and exchanging news about Mimi or his daughters. One of our best has died, and our little church won't be the same.

Our faith, though, teaches us that Christians hope when the rest of the world might despair. I don't think this means that we are not sad. Of course we are sad. But I think our Christian hope invites us to see Bill in the care of Almighty God, invites us to see that death is not the end of the wondrous story of Bill. We celebrate his life; we mourn his death; and we thank God for the example that he has been to us. I will leave you once more with the words of the great Jonathan Edwards:

God will be what will forever entertain the minds of the saints, and the love of God will be their everlasting feast. The redeemed will indeed enjoy other things; they will enjoy the angels, and will enjoy one another; but that which they shall enjoy in the angels, or each other, or in any thing else whatsoever that will yield them delight and happiness, will be what will be seen of God in them.

Amen.