



Robert Dell Thompson

Hebrews 12:1-6

I first met Robbie and Lisa in 2003 while they were engaged. In May of that year, I officiated at their wedding here in this sanctuary. At the time I did not know that Robbie had been through one surgery for melanoma. He did enter one's life as a victim or survivor. He entered the room with a sense of assurance and an easy-going presence. As family described him, Robbie's presence filled a room.

We gather here today in honor of this man and with respect for the many lives he touched with his presence, counsel, and wisdom. Though for many he might come across as hard or in-control, many knew that underneath beat a heart of gold, and deep sensitivity for others. We gather today to grieve the fact that Robbie is no longer here. His death leaves a hole in the lives of many. His strength of presence and expressions of care will be sorely missed. We do not grieve for Robbie, however, we grieve for our own loss with his passing.

We will grieve the unfulfilled dreams, the loss of further opportunities to share with Robbie a walk on the farm, a meal as family, a day at the races, and the touch of Robbie's presence. Grief is a very personal matter. While it sounds selfish, it is the reality of our own loss which evokes our turmoil, anger, pain, and tears. With Robbie's death, we have suffered loss, so we gather together to remember how he impacted our lives, in order that we might release him into God's care.

Robbie was always thinking about others. Even in these last months battling cancer, he did not focus on his own ills. "I don't have it nearly as bad as Cindy. She has to get the kids up, dressed, and off to school." In response to discussions about staying with him during his illness, he would say, "Don't y'all worry yourselves out." When tumors were found in his brain, his concern was, "I don't know what's going to happen to Lisa." Robbie wanted to do everything for Lisa, following his dad's footsteps in caring for others. He wanted to provide as his own father had provided for his family. He wanted the same things, like having a place at the beach. To Maggie, Robbie looked a lot like his dad.

Shortly after their wedding, Robbie called his family. In the back of his mind he knew that his time on earth might be short. He wanted to be sure to provide what his bride would need. "I just married the sweetest girl in the world. I want you to promise me that if anything happens to me you will take care of her."

Robbie wanted Maggie to experience Rocks as he had. He wanted the very best for her. When he spoke of growing up, it was of the values, activities, and morals he had learned. He wanted to pass that on to Maggie along with the best structure and guidance he could offer. Robbie enjoyed home life. He loved to talk with people. Sitting around to talk was entertainment enough. Lisa had to do a lot of cooking, for he always wanted a full course meal at home. Robbie liked to eat and have others eat with him, talking about the day. He enjoyed going out with family to eat at places like O'Charley's.

Robbie loved the farm he moved back to with Lisa and Maggie. He enjoyed going out for walks on the farm with family and friends. Robbie loved his granddaddy. Perhaps that was partly why the farm meant so much to him. When Lisa could not bear to leave his side in death, she took comfort in Robbie's being with his grandfather at last.

Duane and Micah were school friends of Robbie's. They said Robbie was always the leader. They looked-up to him as he touched many lives with his wise counsel. His friends were not just his age peers. He always enjoyed visiting the elderly and doing for them. He would often visit with Irene, Mrs. Faulkner, Billy, and the parents of his friends. He lived for interacting with people. He said it was the interacting with his customers that made his UPS job bearable.

Robbie drank and lived racing from childhood. Although he raced his own car, he regretted never getting into a professional racing crew. If he was not at South Boston, he could be found at races in Orange and Franklin Counties. Robbie kept the racer's prayer on the dash of his car. Robbie's first car was a VW, and Charlene would often see it dismantled outside, wondering how he would ever get it back together. On a recent visit to the doctor to remove a drain tube, he was asked what he had been up to. "I put a new motor in a race care last week."

Robbie had opportunities for closure with many friends over the last year. Homecoming with a friend was his last football game. He got to see many people he had impacted as many came to visit and sent cards expressing their prayers, love and concern. Robbie marveled at all the cards and prayers offered on his behalf. He was proud of what others did do for him, and speaking constantly of the many expressions of concern had been shared.

During the last half-year, Robbie and Cindy bonded as they shared the experience of battling cancer. They would often pray and talk together. They formed a strong brother-sister bond. Robbie would take the kids on a ride through the neighborhood on a golf cart to collect chicks. The Easter Bunny would visit Robbie's with gifts for his nephews, and that made Robbie's day.

The writer of Hebrews' words are a fitting reflection on Robbie's life. Robbie grew up surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. He learned values and the importance of faith in Christ from believers at home and church. Robbie understood that life should be lived for the benefit of others. Robbie was not perfect by any means, but his life spoke of putting others ahead of self. The essence of sin—rebellion against God in self-centered assertion—was not a defining characteristic of Robbie's life. He understood and accepted a responsibility for others. He lived to help those around him, with special care for his new family. Robbie was not bowed down by the impact of cancer on his body. He accepted his lot and focused on caring for his family after his battle was over.

Robbie always waited for the last minute to leave the beach. He would take his uniform to the beach with him, at times going straight to work on the way back. He wanted to take advantage of every minute, just as he did with all of life.

*Christ was a wayworn traveler, / He traveled from door to door. / His occupation chiefly was / Administering to the poor. Chorus: **My warfare'll soon be ended, / My race is almost run. / My warfare'll soon be ended, / Lord, And then I'm going home.** / They called my Lord the devil. / They called his saints the same. / But I ain't expecting any more down here / Than burden, abuse, and shame. (Chorus) And when I get to Heaven / I want you to be there too. / And when I say "Amen" / I want you to say so, too. (Chorus)*

As we grieve Robbie death. May we find encouragement to live for others as he tried to do, trusting God to see us through the turmoil and strain of living.

—Christopher B. Harbin