

24 January 2008
Funeral of Thomas Rayfield

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“True Confidence”

Jesus lives! The vict'ry's won!
Death no longer can appall me;
Jesus lives! Death's reign is done!
From the grave will Christ recall me.
Brighter scenes will then commence;
This shall be my confidence.

Jesus lives! And now is death
But the gate to life immortal;
This shall calm my trembling breath
When I pass its gloomy portal.
Faith shall cry, as fails each sense:
Jesus is my confidence! (LSB #490, vs. 1, 5)

Those are verses from a hymn that we sing at my congregation during the Easter season, and as I was thinking about Tom this week, I could think of no better words to describe him than these. For **Jesus was Tom's confidence**. Tom knew that he was going to soon fail at life. He was going to fail at living, and nothing he could do was going to change that. Sooner or later, his cancer was going to get the better of him. When I first met Tom, he told me the doctors said it was going to be *sooner* – they had given him just three months to live. The doctors turned out to be wrong, but Tom was right. For here we are, some three years *later*.

Jesus was Tom's confidence. Tom had been blessed with a great faith. It hadn't always been so. His faith was a gift to him from His Saviour, and had been forged in the furnace of affliction. But the troubles and trials that he faced were gifts from God, to strengthen him. God knew what he needed, and when he needed it, and how much, so that in the end, Tom's confidence would be not in himself – in his good and virtuous life, in his good deeds, in his faithfulness, or in anything else in him – but solely in His Saviour. To teach Tom that nothing in this world can give us the confidence that we need. The confidence to live, and the confidence to die. Only Jesus can. Only Jesus, who had lived for him, died for him, and then rose to life for

him, so that death would not have the final word – life would. The life of Christ, the living One. The life of Christ, who had promised him life. And in the very early hours of Sunday morning, Jesus kept His promise to Tom. Tom failed at living, and Jesus gave him life. Life which will never be taken away from him.

Yes, **Jesus was Tom's confidence.** So even though it looks to the human eye that cancer has conquered Tom, it is not so. For as we heard in the reading from Romans: “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.” (Romans 8) We are the conquerors – not on the basis of our own strength or goodness, but because the victory of Jesus over sin, death, and the grave has been given to us. The victory of Jesus' cross and resurrection. The victory of Jesus, given to us in the waters of Holy Baptism, where our Heavenly Father took hold of Tom, forgave him his sin, and made him a son by joining him to His Son. And there promising Tom: *You are mine; I will not let you go.* . . . And through all the years, God was faithful to His promise. Even though Tom was often unfaithful and a poor, miserable sinner – as he well knew, and would tell you – **Jesus was his confidence.** He was sure of the promises of God and His Word that in Christ, he was a son of God, and that by grace through faith his sin was forgiven and would not be held against him. For Jesus took it away from him and put it on himself on the cross. Yes, Jesus died for his sin, and so Tom knew that his story would not end in the unfaithfulness and death of sin, but in the faithfulness and life of Christ. The life that he now lives, in **Jerusalem, [his] Happy Home.** (LSB #673)

Jesus was Tom's confidence. Jesus, who *loved* him, *gave* himself for him, *called* him, *justified* him, and now has *glorified* him. It is popular now in our day and age to no longer call funerals *funerals*, but to call them “celebrations of life.” With the idea of celebrating the life of the person now deceased – all that he did and the joys that he had. But if there's one thing Tom would want us to do today, it would be not to celebrate his life now past, but the life he *now* lives, and will live forever. The life of Christ. It is why he wanted us to read from Revelation chapter 7 – a reading that had come to mean much to him. And so today we look not back, but forward, and we celebrate Tom's life now among the *great multitude that no one could number* . . . His life in Jesus Christ . . . comforted by him, and now free from all pain and struggles and tears.

Yes, **Jesus was Tom's confidence.** I remember sitting on the front porch of the house where Tom had his apartment, talking theology with him, worrying if my car was going to be towed because I parked it in the wrong place! During our time there, Tom told me a lot of great stories, about his life, where he had gone and what he had done. **But**

it always came back to Jesus. And he would always tell me: *Pastor, I can't wait to receive the holy mysteries.* That's what he called Holy Communion. He hungered and thirsted for the body and blood of his Saviour. To receive the forgiveness promised him there. To receive the faith he so needed. To receive the life of his Saviour, his confidence. And whether at church, or home, or in the hospital, Tom knew he was unworthy to receive such a gift – *but that's what made it a gift!* And so precious to him. That his Saviour would love him so much. With a love greater than we could possibly understand. With a love that would never end.

Jesus was Tom's confidence. And so now Tom, like Simeon, has *departed in peace.* For His Saviour, His Good Shepherd, who came to him in Holy Baptism, and continued to come to him in Holy Communion, now came for him finally to take him home. And these words of Simeon (Luke 2), which Tom would sing with us in church each week after receiving *the holy mysteries*, have come true for him. And what his eyes saw here only dimly, by grace through faith, he now sees in all fullness and glory in Heaven.

For **Jesus was Tom's confidence.** And if there's one thing that Tom prayed fervently for, it was that Jesus would be your confidence as well. That the hope and faith he had, would be yours. And so he told me: *Pastor, at my funeral, preach Jesus.* For Tom knew that in the end, that's all we have. When our bodies and minds fail, when our faith is weak, when memories of sins past and present plague us, when the devil torments us, and suffering or grief overwhelms us, when we have nothing else in this world that can give us hope – **Jesus is faithful.** He who loved you and gave Himself for you on the altar of the cross, and now lives for you and wants life for you. Life in the forgiveness of your sins. The life that you cannot do; that only He can give. And in the end, that's all that matters. That's *all* that matters.

So rest well, dear friend, until by grace through faith in Christ, we meet again. Or as the words of the hymn that Tom wanted sung this day put it:

O Christ, do Thou [*our*] soul[s] prepare
For that bright home of love
That [*we*] may see Thee and adore
With all Thy saints above. (LSB #673 v. 6)

In the name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.