

The Park Road Pulpit
Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church
Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

*A Good Word for
Jack Henry Cox, Jr.*



Some funerals are more difficult than others. In some, honestly, you have to work hard to find a good thing to say with integrity. Others virtually write themselves. One might think that this would be one of those difficult services. The Baptist minister looking for a good word for the “Prodigal son” who had abandoned the organized church and perhaps felt more at home with the tenets of Buddhism than his own Baptist upbringing. But that is not so. The word religion comes from the Latin stem for “ligament,” for when it is rightly understood, religion binds us together, across cultures and languages and belief – because at the heart of all of the world’s religions are common themes. Themes that were clearly manifest in Jack’s life.

Jack Cox was raised by a Quaker-born father and a Baptist mother in a Baptist church that teaches that the God of Jesus Christ will not be bound by national identity or political ideology, by socio-economic strata or educational pedigree, by cultural expression nor even by doctrinal definitions or religious absolutes. The ancient sage said: *Train up a child in the way that he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it* (Proverbs 22.6). I did not know Jack Cox, Jr, but I believe, because of all that I have learned of him in these past few days, that though he strayed far from home, Lib, though he was Prodigal in his wandering, Jack, he never strayed far from the heart of the Christian faith which you taught him: grace, forgiveness, acceptance, love, service to God through service to one another.

After hearing from these friends, today,¹ I don’t need to tell you anything more about Jack. But I have been asked to offer a pastoral word. I will do so by offering two brief scripture

¹ Three of Jack’s close friends delivered words of eulogy during the service.

lessons, which I believe are instructive to us of Jack's life and even of his theology – if I may be so bold as to presume to speak for him.

The first text I thought of regarding Jack may seem an unlikely one. It comes from Luke's record of the ascension of Jesus. From Acts chapter 1, it reads as follows:

So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' 7He replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 8But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' 9When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 11They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven?' (Acts 1.6-11)

Even after all the time they had spent together, the disciples did not understand. Even read as literally as possible, standing before a resurrected Lord, the disciples were still asking the wrong questions. Religious questions. Questions of doctrine – of nationalism, of eschatology. We're still obsessed by these questions... "What's God going to do for us? Tell us about the signs of the times." But Jesus, as always, would have none of it.

From their narrow concerns about religion and nationalism, Jesus sought to turn their sights global, and to turn them from the questions of religion to the practice of faith. I hear Jesus saying to them, "Who cares about these religious answers?" What is important is that you will receive power... and you will be my witnesses... from here to the ends of the earth..."

They still don't get it. Even after this instruction, when he is taken from them, they are left standing there, staring into heaven. (This as a theological comment, not an historical one.) Two men in robes, presumably heavenly figures, appear on the scene, to speak an ironically down-to-earth message. "What are you looking at? The answer isn't out there. The issue isn't 'heaven.' It's the kingdom come on earth. So don't just stand there – do something!"

And I see Jack Cox, who apparently had little concern for religious questions, for doctrinal answers, whose eyes were not focused heaven-ward, but who loved *God with heart, soul, mind, and strength* (Mark 12.29) – with all that he was – as a witness (maybe unknowing... maybe unlikely... maybe reluctantly) but as a witness of Christ-like selflessness, all the way to the ends of the earth. From the stories I have heard, from the correspondence of his friends, that power had come upon Jack Cox. We can only say, Thanks be to God.

The second lesson includes the only reference to the crocodile in the Bible. (Jack would not have liked it!) From one of the so-called “holiness codes” of ancient Israel, these words regarding what is clean and what is unclean:

These are unclean for you among the creatures that swarm upon the earth: the weasel, the mouse, the great lizard according to its kind, the gecko, the land-crocodile... (Leviticus 11.29-30)

Yes... that unclean crocodile! But that is not the final word from the Christian scripture, for revelation continues, as the early Congregational leader John Robinson once declared, “There is more light and truth to break forth from God’s holy word.” So Peter, that impetuous apostle, who had been raised under the laws of Israel, Peter, who knew what was clean and what was unclean had a vision on a roof in Joppa.

About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ But Peter said, ‘By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.’ The voice said to him again, a second time, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’

Over the course of the next several days, Peter came to understand what this vision had meant – of animals and of people [and] ...*Peter began to speak to them: ‘I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God... (Acts 10.9-36)*

And I see Jack Cox, who not only loved those dirty crocodiles and all of God's other creatures, but who seemed to know implicitly of their goodness (their cleanliness), and that God knows no partiality for people.

Though American by birth and passport, Jack Cox was a universal citizen. In his last trip home, exasperated at his mother's wasteful use of that second paper towel, he exclaimed, "You Americans!" Jack understood that national borders were human contrivances, and that the questions of the mind, the desires of the heart, the needs of the body, the longings of the soul – are universal. In the end, there are no Americans and Laotians, Capitalists or Communists, Buddhists or Christians... just people, making our way, together, across time and place to a destination that is beyond our wildest imaginings. What light God has yet to reveal... where God will yet take us... cannot be seen from here.

But I believe Jack would say it is very much in our hands to bring that future into the present – a view I believe he shared with Jesus, who taught us to pray for the *kingdom to come on earth, as it is in heaven* (Matthew 6), and who taught us to work, to give, even our very lives, to make that a reality – even if it costs us our very lives.

So, for Jack Henry Cox, Jr., who loved this world, the works of God's hands, who was a dedicated servant and steward, who was always busy doing, when so many others just stand and stare, who understood that heavenly visions become reality only at the hands of human visionaries. Jack who was a citizen of the world, a visionary, who walked by a light that is yet unknown to most of the world's people...

For Jackie Cox, crocodile lover, universal citizen – Thanks be to God!