

The Park Road Pulpit
Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church
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A Good Word for John Kester
March 29, 2010

“Tell me about John Kester,” I asked on Friday. Without hesitation Gay said, “He was a wild man!” Now I understand there are several connotations for this word, and let us acknowledge that more than one of those may apply to John Kester, but with the scant personal experience I had with John, and with the picture that his family painted on Friday – I take this to be a high compliment. Yes, John was a wild man! In some sense, we all ought to be.

John Kester loved life. If Jesus’ words are more fitting for anyone, well, you may be hard pressed to find him: *I came that you might have life... and have it abundantly!* (John 10.10) In his years, which ran shorter than they should have, John experienced that abundance in ways that is foreign to many. He lived hard. Loved hard. Laughed hard. Played hard. And my guess is that beneath all that hard loving, one-lining charisma was the soul of one who, in his own way, also prayed hard.

John never met a stranger. At the annual family beach trip, he was always promoting something – setting up the volleyball court, he’d walk the beach and gather a crowd: “There’s a game a two o’clock... come play!” I hear that his Super Bowl party this year was the hottest ticket in Vero Beach! He got his career in sales honest, you know. It was who he was.

John loved his motorcycles – and this was one of the places of contact that we had, a mutual interest in that greatest of American rumble machines, the Harley Davidson. It was a common interest that brought together two, otherwise, probably unlikely characters. A Baptist minister and, well... John Kester. But that was just like John – to find a common interest, a way to connect, with just about everyone. When I asked Justin what John was riding lately, he said he

had turned in the Harley for a custom chopper, a Big Dog. Well, of course he had! All the chrome, all the character, the personification of do-it-yourself individualism, with more than a hint of rebellion – that was just right for one who lived life on-the-edge, with so much passion at the center. If it's too loud – you're too old! Yep, that was John.

Lest I paint the wrong picture, though, let me be quick to say that John wasn't just a party-er – he was the life of the party, wherever he was. At home, at the office, on the beach... John had a gregarious nature that was magnetizing. He set up the garage as a pool hall of sorts, and Justin's friends loved to come over – though they learned quickly not to bet against Justin's dad! He was a good looking man who loved his daughter's friends, and loved to tease them all, getting a special joy out of embarrassing her. When she got the news, Allison called a friend who immediately was brought to tears – not just because Allison was losing her father, but because Allison's friend was losing a friend, too. And being a friend to your kids and to their friends may be one of the greatest gifts a parent can give. All those growing up years as he was taking Justin to weekend soccer tournaments, they were developing a bond that was worth even more than all had to John shell out for the gas and the meals and the hotel rooms. Those are memories that will last, forever – and they insure that as long as there are friends and family who can call his name, whose lives have been touched by his passionate living – John Kester will never die.

A professional motorcycle racer named Bill McKenna once said, "Life is not a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving safely in one pretty and well-preserved piece, but [it is skidding] across the line broadside, thoroughly used up, worn out, leaking oil, shouting... Wow, what a ride!" O, that we all could learn to live until we were just all used up... having given all we could give... having taken all we could soak in. Who could ask for me?

John was committed to his passions, and he expressed one of his commitments by volunteering for service in the Viet Nam war, where he was shot twice, and awarded the Purple Heart for his valor, and an honorable discharge. Though he wouldn't talk to his family about it, much, he was for a time an annual speaker in a class at Providence Day School. Country. Commitment. War. The good, the bad. The flag stands here today in representation of that service.

But John's commitment and love were no where expressed as thoroughly as to his family, especially his children, Allison, whom he called Allie, and Justin. These two will carry on his legacy in their blood, and his laughter and touch in their memories. And you were there for him, to the very end. It is the best of what family means, so I say to you, whom he so dearly loved, "*Well done, good and faithful servants*" (Matthew 25.23).

When I asked about John's faith, there was a moment of quiet around the table. Justin finally said, "I think he was sometimes torn in faith... he wanted to believe." I love the honesty of that statement, and of that kind of struggling faith. On the banks of the Jabbok River, a young man named Jacob wrestled one night, all night, with one who turned out to be a messenger from God, and in the end Jacob's name was changed to Israel – which means "*one who contends with God and with humans – and prevails*" (Genesis 32.28). This is not just the story of the nation of Israel, but surely it is John's story of faith, too. There is unquestionably more faith in honest doubt than in any unthinking recital of the creed. John was Raised Right... taught the stories of Jesus... given that firm foundation – and though his faith may have been a little un-orthodox, well, so was his life – why should anyone expect anything different!? So this day, we gather not only to celebrate this one who lived on the "wild side," so to speak – but to give thanks to God

for a genuine faith that burned deep within. For John, too, contended with God. That is the heart of faith.

When I asked the family to give me one word to describe John, “charismatic” is what I heard. And this will be the final word, for the Greek word “grace” is buried within that description of John Kester. Charismatic – *charis* – Charity... Love... Grace... was at the heart of his charisma – and that is a gift that only comes from God.

So for that wild, untamed passion and for the grace that was the heart of his charisma – for John Marcus Kester, III – Thanks Be to God!