***A Good Word for Johnny Doyle***

I have never known a better man than Johnny Doyle. They say you’re not supposed to lie at funerals (Johnny may have told me that!), and I am not. I’m not saying he’s the best person who ever lived, some kind of perfect, gilded saint. I’m just saying that I know to be true: he bore his share of earthy imperfections, and I have never known a better man.

He was born to a sharecropping family in Savannah and was raised in the rich, rural farmland of Sylvania, Georgia. Life was hard in those days. There was no electricity or running water in his house until Johnny was nine years old. The family’s only transportation was a horse and buggy. They scraped for everything they had, but like many others, Johnny and his sister, Eloise, are living proof that love and the integrity of hard work on the source of character, not being raised with the comforts of money and convenience.

Johnny Doyle was a product of his childhood, the time, the place, the environment of the American south in a day that had not yet heard of the Civil Rights Movement or ERA… Much less Pride or #MeToo Or Black Lives Matter. Johnny never outgrew his raising. He was proud of his heritage, never afraid to claim those roots. No, he never outgrew his raising, but because of the call of justice, to which he was attuned from a very early age, he did outgrow the prejudice and fear, of a culture that has proven difficult to escape.

Johnny was the product of his childhood. Not the sum of it.

Back in those days you started working young, and by thirteen Johnny had had his first official job. It was in the Chuck Wagon Restaurant, and for the next 67 years Johnny was always at home in the kitchen. But it was not hard work that characterized Johnny Doyle’s life. Most folks of his generation learned to work hard. They did not all make compassion and justice the mark of their labor. Johnny did.

In his first job Johnny earned $10 a week. He learned that on his very first day on the job a 13-year-old white boy would bring home more than the African-American woman working alongside him, she with more experience and a whole family to feed. He knew that was, simply put, wrong, and on that day a seed of righteous indignation was planted. He never forgot that lesson in inequality, and for the rest of his days, in all of his restaurants, and through the convictions that he expressed openly, Johnny worked to change his world by treating all people fairly and as his equals.

He ran the H & D Restaurant for three decades, and he learned that where there is good food to be served, people line up to eat, whether they can pay or not. In its heyday there was a line out the front door of the H&D, and there was another line at the back, where he consistently provided meals for those who came to him hungry, but with no means to pay. Beverly says it was not until his last year that the restaurant was ever vandalized and robbed. She gives credit to neighbors looking out for the restaurant owned by a friend.

Rose says her father was never afraid to ask challenging questions of the world and of himself. While book learning did not float his boat (a year and a half at Florida State was enough of the world of academia!), Johnny Doyle never quit growing. He had a sharp mind, an open heart. Armed, already with years of life lessons, Johnny and Beverly joined the Shamrock Baptist Church, and that environment first allowed him to begin exploring his faith. He never quit.

Trey says his father faced his demons, as all good people must. But with God’s help, and surrounded always in a community of faith, a boy raised with a view limited by cotton fields and stalks of tobacco, and a religion just as shortsighted, that boy became *a man after God’s own heart* (Acts 13.22).

Johnny would scoff at my saying so, but the collection of hymns in our Book called Psalms opens with a word of praise for Johnny Doyle. Let me read it in the King James that Johnny would have learned in his childhood:

*Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night* (at the restaurant, down at the fishing hole, tilling the community garden, laughing with his grandchildren) *and he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, That bringeth forth his fruit and his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he do with shall prosper*.

I have never known a better man than Johnny’ ‘Doyle. Whatever he did prospered. His life prospered. His love prospered. His laughter prospered. In the legacy he leaves, he will continue to prosper.

As we talked about the trajectory of his 80 years, I asked his family which Johnny they will remember, the idealistic young man, the hard-working middle-aged man, the fun-loving old man? Trey told me that the Johnny I have known in these last 15 years is the best version of his father. What a compliment. He took all that came in his life, the good and the bad, the hard knocks and every opportunity, and he built something more important than wealth. Johnny built a marriage, a family, a career, a faith. In 80 years of earthly living, Johnny built a solid, good life.

Though we will continue to weep in his absence, we are gathered this day to celebrate the good life of Johnny Doyle. Whatever he did prospered. Thanks be to God. Amen!