 The Park Road Pulpit

*Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church*

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***A Good Word for Michael Simmons***

September 30, 2019

Michael Simmons was a quiet soul whose life of steady, sturdy convictions cut a path of commitment through a culture of inconsistency and wavering loyalties. Michael was dedicated to the best impulses of his Christian tradition and was true to what he believed.

I don’t know a better word to speak of anyone today. Michael was true. Not flamboyant or pretentious, not vulgar or arrogant, not self-seeking or self-serving – Michael was true. Writing to the ancient church in Philippi, the Apostle Paul could have been speaking directly of Michael Simmons when he said:

*Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things* (Philippians 4.8).

The Michael Simmons known by his church and his friends dedicated his life to thinking about commendable things, things that are worthy of praise. He was an avid reader, a lifelong student of history and humanity. In knowing so well the geography of lands and peoples, Michael knew the workings of justice and injustice in the course of human history. He was more aware than most that the sacred and the sordid are both possible for human beings, and as a student of his own history he had set his mind on things that matter – in order to make what difference he could in his little corner of the world. And make a difference he did – so many of you are here today as a testimony to that fact!

A frivolous, silly word never passed his lips. He was not pompous, Michael could enjoy a good laugh, but he had no use for the shallow fads and infatuations of the culture. He was serious-minded and steady, untiring in keeping his word. Trained as a chemist he understood that the composition of elements, the right mix in the right proportion, was essential – and Michael provided the right mix of right thinking (orthodoxy) and right acting (orthopraxy) to his work, his leisure, his faith.

When we became the pastors at Park Road, 19 years ago, we quickly got to know Michael. He was raised in Greenwood, SC, just 25 minutes down the road from our hometown, so we shared a Palmetto State connection. And Michael graduated from Erskine College where Amy and I spent the last year of our seminary studies, so we also shared a connection through Due West, SC – and not a lot of people make their connections through Due West, so this gave us a quick, steady bond.

Michael was regular in his attendance, but at that time had taken no leadership roles in his church. He had suffered for some years with a vocal condition called spasmodic dysphonia, the same condition shared by the radio host, Dianne Rhem, which causes wavering inflections in the pitch and fluidity of speaking. Because of this condition, Michael was seen but rarely heard. He showed up, but mostly stayed in the background.

But about the third year of our pastorate, six members of Park Road traveled to Cuba on an exploratory mission. We went to consider a partnership with a church there. We spent nine days that first year, exploring Havana and traveling through the countryside to visit with three small Cuban congregations. Michael had signed up for the trip, undoubtedly because his knowledge of US history had sparked an interest in seeing first-hand our closest neighbor to the south, with whom our country had experienced so much political and military tension.

In our travel group were also three people from a church in Washington, DC, one of whom was a speech pathologist by training. Somewhere along the bumpy way, as we traversed the Cuban countryside, Sylvia talked with Michael about training techniques that were available for his vocal condition, and the therapy that he sought as soon as he returned changed his life.

The change in Michael’s voice was dramatic, and the change in his persona no less so. Quickly Michael went from attending in the background, to working very much at the front and center of the life of our church. He pursued committee work, even taking committee leadership roles, and he became virtually indispensable to our diaconate. For many years Michael was in charge of training our deacons on the Sunday morning worship routine. He maintained a detailed schedule, and cracked a mean whip to keep everyone in line. He took seriously his role to ensure that greeters and ushers were in place for each Sunday, and that we were organized and ready to assist with communion on those special Sundays.

Maybe most importantly, Michael wound the grandfather clock, with regularity. It has not “tick-tocked” in months, and someone had suggested that we offer the clock as a gift to Michael, since it is not being used in our renovated Helt Hall. Could there be a better symbol of the life and faith of Michael Simmons than that particular grandfather clock? Standing quietly, inauspiciously in its place, it beats out an ever-present reminder of the steady pace of time; the quiet chiming of the hour, a subtle cue to the unfolding of history that occurs under the watchful providence of a transcendent rhythm. That clock is a reminder of God, the Source of all timekeeping, the divine rhythm of human history, unfolding minute by mundane minute, moment by mysterious moment.

In a world that loves its heroes, its stars, the flamboyant excesses of wealth and power, we need more consistent timekeepers like Michael Simmons, steady, faithful, true. The hymn by William Croft speaks of this moment:

Time, like an ever-rolling stream, Soon bears us all away;

We fly forgotten, as a dream Fades at the opening day.

But Michael will not be forgotten, not as long as the clock tolls the endless hours, the pendulum divides eternity into measured minutes. As long as we can tell his story, speak his name, remember being touched by his quiet, faithful way Michael will never die.

For Michael Simmons, steady, faithful, true, thanks be to God.