

## USNA Class of '67 Memorial Service Homily, 22 Oct. 2017

Good afternoon. It's good to be back together again here in this place, where four years I would gather on Sunday Mornings, wishing for another hour of sleep in the hall.

My name is Russell Johnson and I was a member of 3<sup>rd</sup> Co. and graduated with you all 50 years ago...back when the earth was still cooling. I chose to become a Marine and served for 12 years, first in the infantry, and later as an aviator.....separating in 1979 to attend seminary. I've been an Episcopal priest now for 35 years, serving 7 parishes in 5 states. And I can tell that you are **not** an Episcopal congregation because..... in Episcopal congregations there is always a lively competition for the seats.....in the back of the church!

Anyway, I want you to know how glad I am that you have come here this afternoon and how special I find this time with you. I am deeply honored to be preacher today for this memorial service.

Before I begin there are two things we must do,....secondly we need to pray....but before we do that, we need to honor and greet some folks sitting here among us....We need to recognize here among us....some folks who are displaying a rare brand of courage and commitment to the memories of their loved ones. We need to greet them and honor them,...for their presence here with us... is a wonderful display of their ongoing love and hope,.... And it is an honor and gift to this class. I know I am asking of you a lot...but would those of you having suffered loss....our widows and widowers and family members of our fallen .... would you be so kind as to rise and allow us to recognize you by our applause.

Thank you so very much.

And now would you all please pray with me.....

Almighty God, Ruler of the Universe help the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts to be acceptable in your sight...for we gather here this day..... to remember all those who.... girded with hope.... have shared life with us and..... have gone on before us in death. As we share and remember our fallen, grant us the gift of compassion for one another, the practice of kindness and gentleness for all our memories. All this we ask In the name of God, creator, redeemer and sustainer. Amen

Let me begin by telling you a story about two clergy friends down in Florida who were traveling together one day on a trip to another town.....and they got into a silly argument over the pronunciation of the name of a town called “Kis..sime” or “Kiss a me”. Both were sure they were correct, so..... the argument became really heated and so when they arrived on the outskirts of the town.... they pulled into the first business they saw and got out of the car and stomped into the front door and up to a counter behind which stood a very pleasant-looking young woman. They said, almost together.... “Where are we right now..... standing right here?” “What do you call this place and please say it very carefully” .....and the young woman, non-plussed, looked at them and said... very slowly..... “Burger King”.

Now...the point of the story I think is that..... context....context is really important.

Our gathering for these last few days has been in the context of **reunion and hope**. We have gathered here at Annapolis to re.....union with one another,..... to greet one another for sure, to rekindle bonds of friendship, to catch up....to share stories and lies and histories that have separated us in space and time ..but now today.....to remember our fallen, to name them and so..... re...union with those no longer here

or able to greet and rekindle old friendships themselves..... ***For as we name them*** .... they rejoin with us, take on life again and complete our class. And we do all this in hope...hope that one day we perhaps... will share life once again with those we have lost..... reunion.....hope.

As you know.....our class has a long history confronting Death. Before we even graduated we had lost four of our members...Bob Bossert, Jim Campbell, Jim McClendon and Ed Wagner, remembered in our copies of the LUCKY BAG. And just this Friday.... we said goodbye to Dennis Rogers here on these grounds. We know death and death knows us.

When Death comes..it wants to come among us as a conquering giant with all its preening swagger....believing that in taking us..it has the last word. It moves among us, claiming this one or that...hoping to crush our spirits, make us cringe and cowed and want to flee..... But we...**we will have none of that!**

Death for us is **not** the end, or **a defeat**, or even... **a life-crushing blow to end all life.**

Oh yes.....for sure....it brings grief and sorrow..... that those taken are no longer here to share a hug, join in some laughter, hold a hand or dance and sing. That grief **is real, and**..... it has its own time table and .....needs to be honored and supported.

But our loss at a death.... is always tempered **with hope... a hope** that death is not the end..... but... a continuation, a newer, richer beginning with no end.

Just as those we have lost lived life with zest and courage and conviction.. death, once the grief and pain runs out over time, .....

death also evokes in us a conviction that life.....life is for living fully and richly..... not something to be forever constricted by grief. Living life fully after death is not a betrayal of our loved ones. Rather it is a testimony of that love and a mimic of their courage and bravery.

Now,... my spiritual tradition is Christian....and we Christians proclaim a belief in resurrection, so it's easier for us. **But** not all traditions do.....However most all traditions **do embrace** a hope in a future. The reading from Wisdom heard a few minutes ago records the writer as saying that, while some see death as destruction....those who have died are buoyed with the hope of immortality. And I believe most people...maybe all....harbor some hope in a future.

Three guys were asked the question about their own deaths, "When you die and are placed in a coffin and people look down on you.....what would you like people to say about you?" The first guy says, "I hope they say, that I was a good man, worked hard, treated people well and loved my family." The second guy says, "I hope that they will say that I was honest and true, served my country well, and cared for others." The third guy says, "I hope they say.....Hallelujah! And look at that.... he's moving and breathing!".

I believe most people..maybe all...harbor some hope in a future.

This class, the class of '67, is born and bred into hope! We began in hope of getting into this place and, once here..... our lives depended on hope! Hope that when President Kennedy arrived he would grant clemency. Hope that when the Brigade returned at the end of Plebe Summer we would survive. Hope that eventually that rotten 2<sup>nd</sup> classman running your hide would relent. Hope that you wouldn't get hit with a flying plate of eggs the morning before the Army Navy game

and hope..... that Roger would beat Army that very day! We were born and bred into hope. It's in our DNA.

And we were awash in hope for four years here. Even after graduation we lived in hope. Hope that, despite a heaving deck, this night cat launch and recovery would be fine. Hope that this helicopter pilot would deliver me to the correct insertion point, and in four days come and get me. Hope .....that all of us would return from combat.

But of course...we did not..... we know death, and yet..... we are unbowed.....we go on.... hoping.

And that is true because.....life is for living.

And oh how we have lived! Never crushed by death...we have faced into life and embraced it fully. Some have flown to the edges of space, others dove to the depths of the oceans. We have stood on the bridge of our ships and leaned into the storms aimed at us, we have led troops into crashing battle and faced down lethal enemies. We saw one of us become the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, another an ambassador. We have Generals and Admirals, Captains and Colonels galore, others have left the service and become lawyers, doctors, professors. We have become CEOs of companies, written books, lent our expertise at every level of business and government, and walked in all the corridors of power. We have married strong, beautiful women, raised above average children and helped in our communities. I know of one who leads outward bound treks for wounded warriors, and another,,,,, along with his wife, who helps make translations of the Bible for other languages possible. In short..... we have been remarkable..... even..... magnificent! We have lived rich, vibrant, challenging lives. We have lived....right in Death's face...despite Death's challenge.

50 years ago this past summer you and I stood in the heat of a hot summer day and as President John Kennedy, with an array of Admiral's and Captains behind him, told us to stand at ease. We were too scared to do it, but finally he told a joke that I remember went like this.

There was an Admiral who had a yeoman who had been with him for years. Every morning the Admiral would come to work, sit down at his desk and reach down to a drawer at the bottom of his desk, take out a metal lock box, take out the key for it, open it and take out a small piece of paper, read it, put it back in the metal lock box, lock it, put it into the drawer, close the drawer and begin his day.

A day came when the Admiral died and, after the service was held and things had settled down, this yeoman went to the Admiral's widow and asked if he could look in the lock box at its contents because, he believed the contents were something very motivating and inspirational and might help him. She agreed and gave him the key. He went to the desk, opened the drawer, withdrew the lock box, inserted the key and took out the piece of paper. And read it. You probably remember its contents. On the piece of paper were written the words.....port is left.....starboard is right..... Did I get that right????

At the time, standing there in the sun, I thought the president was making fun of the Admirals and Captains as a way of ingratiating himself with us. But over the years I have come to believe..... that the president was telling us that the most basic things..... are the most important.....

And now...sad to say....the sands of time are running down. As life grows ever more sweet...it grows ever more short.. The time left to work on life's most basic thing, its most important goal, grows short.

I believe that the most basic goal of life....this life we live within these fleshly bodies...the goal of life..... is to become...a fully loving person. Now some people never discover this goal and others never fully understand it. Some people **do** comprehend it, but ....never strive after it. But those who **do** comprehend...and work at it...they are those who discover that life....life really is rich, full of abundance and always worth living. They also come to understand that until the power of love....replaces the love of power.....this world will never know peace.

My spiritual tradition learns this from scripture .....but you can discover the same sort of leanings in other traditions that prescribe practices that lead to fuller, richer lives.

Today..... we heard the writer of John .....who writes many years after Jesus has died,..... that what they discovered in Jesus in those three short years living with him, was that in him.... was the very nature of God...that is.... that God is love and that when we love one another God's love becomes alive in us.

And we heard from the pen of St. Paul that he was praying for each of us that... we would come to know the love of God.. so that knowing it, we would become fully loving ourselves, filled with the utter fullness of God.....that is..... the utter fullness of love.

Now, working at becoming fully loving isn't that hard. Just takes a little focus. We start with those closest to us and expand outward. I have to tell you, I've buried a lot of people in 35 years. When they, and not all do, when they shared with me their regrets....I've never heard anyone regret that they didn't spent more time in the office, or made more money, or acquired more toys but.....I **have** heard gentle, sad regrets..... over the time not spent with lovers, regrets over..... lost

relationships gone south, regrets over wasted time that might have touched friends or family.

So..... while the sands of time **are** running down.....there is still time left, and each of us **can** lean into life's most important goal in a myriad of ways. Reaching out to others with love is important. But..... striving to become fully loving is a two-stroke effort. You have to offer love to others **and**..... you have to let others love you.

Find a need and find a way. Vets, children, teenagers needing mentoring, disaster relief, heck, just putting a quarter into a guy's parking meter, or paying back a toll on the highway, puts love into the world. Random acts of kindness count. And then the hard part..... you have to become vulnerable enough to let love into your own life, too. And a secret here....it's hard to become vulnerable to love the more successful you are. And we are so successful...

It's easy to fall into the trap of seeing the need for love in others, but not your own need. So.....Let others love you. It feels good and it is good because..... it allows you to give more love out to others.

You and I still have time....time to embrace the most important goal of life...it is a worthy goal full of promise.....and full of hope.

One final story please....short....perhaps you've heard it before. There was an old lady named Harriet, who had lived a good life, attended a church, lived as best she could the Gospel, gave of herself, and used her life to make life better, and now she was near death. She called her pastor to her bedside and gave him some very specific directions for her burial service. She said to him that she wanted a viewing the night before her service, and for him to be standing beside the open casket. She also said she wanted to be dressed in a new blue dress she had

purchased, and..... was to have a **common dinner fork** placed in her hand, sticking up..... so people would see it. He, of course, was perplexed and asked her about the instructions. She explained. "When people come up to my casket to view me they will say, Oh doesn't she look nice in that new blue dress but.....what's with the fork?". And you will say, "Harriet attended many pot luck dinners at the church and at most of them, a volunteer would come around collecting dinner plates **before the desert was served**. And they would invariably say to her and others, "Keep Your Fork.....**the best is yet to come**". Hope in us trumpets.....The best **is yet** to come!

So....If I were to say to you "Keep your fork".....What would you reply?"

"Keep your fork.....the best is yet to come".

I believe that, and being a people born and bred in hope,....you can too.

And that's all I'm saying..... in the name of God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.