

The Eulogy

Early in my pastorate a young woman asked me the definition and purpose of a eulogy and since that time I have made it a practice to begin with an explanation, for it is naïve to think we all have the same experiences and a shared knowledge base. The word eulogy has its roots in Middle English, Latin and Greek and means *praise*. When eulogy is used within the African American Baptist tradition it is praise for the life of the person who has been called from this place to better place **and** words of comfort for those left behind. In the time allotted I wish to praise the woman I knew and pray my words bring you comfort.

Would you pray with me and for me as I work with this theme?

IN HER OWN WORDS!

SHALL WE PRAY!

God of Heaven and Earth before we ask anything of you we need to say thank you. Thank you for providing for us all night long and waking us this morning. Thank you for those who introduced us to You and Your Son Jesus the Christ. Thank you for the life and work and faith of Ms. Willie Mae Gooch. Father, I ask that the Holy Spirit move in this place bringing healing and comfort to the friends and family gathered. Abba, please allow the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart to be acceptable to you. Amen and Amen.

IN HER OWN WORDS

It is not uncommon for the words of a great preacher to be played at their final services and I have attended services where the tape of a noted vocalist was played and sometimes the funeral program will contain words penned by the deceased. Ms. Willie Mae was neither a preacher, a vocalist of note or a published poet but she had some words, some ideas that are worth remembering. The first word comes from Maya Angelou, one of her favorite poets.

STILL I RISE

In Sunday School, Ms. Willie Mae shared many stories of her early years in the South. We heard of the abuse, the poverty, the burden of being black and female. But she also shared the joys of working for her own money; buying her own home; raising her children. When she became ill she gave her testimony of faith in her God. She declared that regardless of the outcome she would be all right. I believe she would agree with Maya who penned

"I did my best, I hope you do the same."

She lived the life that Maya spoke about when she penned **STILL I RISE**.

LIVE THE LIFE I SING ABOUT

Ms. Willie Mae and I shared many things in common: purple was one of our favorite colors, shoes and clothes were important to us and we enjoyed the singing of Mahalia Jackson. As I prepared this message I researched the songs that Mahalia recorded and it seems to me the one that most closely reflects the life of Ms. Willie Mae included these words:

I'm gonna live the life I sing about in my song
I'm gonna stand for right and I always shun the wrong
If I'm in the crowd, if I'm alone
On the streets or in my home
I'm gonna live the life I sing about in my song
Everyday, everywhere
On a busy thoroughfare

Folks may watch me; some may spot me
Say I'm foolish
But I don't care
I can't sing one thing and then live another
Be saint by day and a devil undercover
I've got to live the life I sing about in my song¹

¹ http://www.lyricsmode.com/lyrics/m/mahalia_jackson/im_going_to_live_the_life_i_sing_about_in_my_song.html#!

If Ms. Willie Mae believed you to be out of order she told you. It was never harsh, never demeaning, just the truth. If the sermon was good she told you and if the sermon was lacking she said "Now, Pastor you get some rest next week."

Ms. Willie Mae demonstrated her love for the children and youth of our church over the years. At Christmas, there were cards with something inside, when she was up to sewing there were blankets for the bed and warm throws for the couch. When I left for vacation there was a little something; and for no particular reason, there was lunch money; she never forgot my birthday or clergy appreciation Sunday.

At Harvest Dinner and Christmas there was homemade rolls and Caramel Cake. Cake and rolls so good that some of us believed they had healing power.

She did not just faithfully attend Sunday School, she read the lesson, participated in the discussion, raised questions and shared what she knew from experience. When she disagreed with me she told me and when she did not understand she asked questions until she was able to glean understanding.

She **lived the life she sang about every day** that I knew her.

FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD

At First Baptist, we have a tradition of secret sisters, women within the congregation who commit to praying for one another for a full year. Ms. Willie Mae was one of those women and a few years ago I was designated to pray for her. When you sign up to be a secret sister you provide information that you would like to share. Ms. Willie Mae listed John 3:16 as her favorite scripture, you know the passage in the KJV:

¹⁶For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

Let me draw your attention to two words within that verse for they tell so much about Ms. Willie Mae. **The first is love.** She loved her God, her family, her church family and her friends. She lived the definition of love.

⁴Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. ⁸Love never fails. (1 Corinthians 13)

The second word is **everlasting life** and it is connected to the first. My bible reports it this way:

²⁵On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?" ²⁷He answered, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' ²⁸"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live." (Luke 10)

The old saints would sometimes say that the preacher tried to preach that poor soul into heaven. Well, this preacher did not need to preach Ms. Willie Mae into heaven. She lived the life she sang about, she loved her God and her neighbor as she loved herself and she will rise again for

*¹⁵According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, **and the dead in Christ will rise first.** (1Thes 4.)*

Amen and Amen.