

Mike Mitchell Memorial Service – September 1, 2011

Prelude music -- Margie

Welcome, opening remarks, prayer -- Jerry

We're here to celebrate and remember Mike Mitchell's full and energetic life.

It's traditional about now to read a published obituary. It gives everyone a synopsis or snapshot of the one whose life is remembered and celebrated. Mike Mitchell's life doesn't lend itself to a synopsis or snapshot. Rather, Mike's memory lives on in a legacy. A legacy of 56 years of marriage to Wanda. Two daughters, Kim and Kelli, two sons, Pat and Mike, six grandchildren, Macee, Meagan, Mitchell, Mache', Dylan, Sutton, and four great-grandchildren, Leah, Luke, Matthew, and Jacob. Papa's legacy becomes the stories of these fourteen people, and those who come after them. They honor Mike's memory by carrying it forward in their own families, loving each other at home, and also in their own life and work. Mike's sons, daughters, and grandchildren are living memorials of his character as they teach, as they study and deliver health care or the law, make music, and care for their families.

This is how it has always been.

When the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews, it was his custom to go to a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and misfortune averted.

Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Magid of Mezeritch, had occasion, for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say, "Master of the Universe, Listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer." And again the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later, Rabbi Moshe-Lieb of Sasov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say, "I do not know how to say the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient." It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished.

Then it fell to the Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God. "I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story, and this must be sufficient." And it was sufficient. God made man (God made woman) because he loves stories.

For sure that's why he made Mike.

We begin by the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God, and in Communion with the Holy Spirit. Let us pray:

Prayer: Our God of grace and glory, we remember and honor Mike today and we thank you for giving him to us to know and to love. By your compassionate presence, console us in our mourning. Inspire in us the confidence of a certain faith, the comfort of holy hope, and the peace which passes all understanding; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Scripture readings – Elizabeth

Psalm 121

**I lift up mine eyes unto the hills. From whence cometh my help?
My help cometh from the Lord, who made the heavens and the earth.
He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.
Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.
The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade on your right hand.
The sun shall not smite you by day, nor the moon by night.
The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.
The Lord will watch over your going out and your coming in
from this time forth and for evermore.**

Psalm 23

**The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul.
He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake
Ye though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil for thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.
Thou annointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.**

John 14:1-3.

Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so would I have told you that I go and prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, that where I am, you may be also.

About Mike – Elizabeth

We meet today as family and friends to remember and to celebrate the grand and full life of Mike Mitchell, who missed celebrating his 80th birthday by just a few weeks! While we know that Mike has not felt well for awhile and has lived with

significant pain for much of the last year, we were not at all ready to give this gentle, fun-loving, cantankerous and boisterous friend back to you so suddenly this week. We are grateful that Mike did not have to linger and be incapacitated any more by his worn out body and it is comforting that he died after a fun-filled weekend in Rui Doso with some of their many friends. I heard that Mike had recently said he was tired of being waited upon and while we know that he felt miserable much of the time, I doubt Mike would know how to function very well without Wanda waiting upon him hand and foot!

Whenever some of my friends in Post die and I am preparing what to say, I usually call Louise and Wanda for some funny remembrances that can be told in a church! After sitting at my computer yesterday and being sad that we had to be here at all, I got a grip and called Louise. Being the wise woman that she is, Louise reminded me first of all to be brief, because lunch will be served at 11:30 sharp and Mike truly loved to eat good food and did not like to have to wait forever to get it! Secondly, Louise said Mike would want us to laugh on this day when we said nice things about him because in sad situations, Mike always thought of something funny to say!

One of the things we all loved about Mike is that he truly was the life of the party! Mike loved to tell stories and make us all laugh so hard we would cry and try hard not to wet our pants! Whenever I saw Mike, he would give me a big hug, ask me how I was doing and say, "Wanda, get her something to drink!" Mike loved to go to Las Vegas and be entertained, he had great fun listening to Western music, and he thoroughly enjoyed being in Rui Doso with Wanda and their friends and placing his many bets at the horse races!

Louise said she will always remember that Mike was in charge of the beverage concession stand for many years at the O.S. Ranch Steer Roping and Art Show Benefit. Louise said the beer Mike got the Tech girls to sell was supposed to be illegal and she has no idea how Mike was able to get around that small technicality but he did and made lots of money for the West Texas Boys Ranch! And most likely because selling beer at the concession stand was not fun enough, Mike always organized a washer-pitching contest that drew people in and took their quarters!

Mike loved his family and was diligent about caring for them. After Larry died, Mike and Wanda opened their home and hearts even more fully for Kim and the kids and grandkids and provided them with a safe and secure home-place that was always filled with much love, life, laughter and frivolity! Through the years, Mike cared diligently for his dear aunt who depended upon him to care for her and her business. When they lived in Post, Wanda always fixed a big meal for Sunday lunch and after church they fed and entertained Minnie, the Mills and anyone else they thought of to invite at the last minute! Mike was always busy and never idle and truly cherished his time with friends and family. His great love of people and life, his wonderful sense of humor and mischievous ways, his

hearty laughter and genuine care of family and friends have truly influenced our lives, our faith and our deep well-being.

We are truly more alive and more whole because of Mike's fun-loving presence and lively embrace! Thanks be to you O, God, for the many ways Mike Mitchell will continue to bless us, encourage us, pester us and bring us smiles, affirmation and great joy!

And Jesus said, "These things I have said and done that my joy may be in you and your joy may be full!"

Prayer – God of all grace, you sent your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, to bring life and immortality to light. We give you thanks because by his death Jesus destroyed the power of death and by his resurrection has opened the kingdom of heaven to all. We pray that we might be ever more certain that because he lives we shall live also, and that neither death nor life, nor things present nor things to come shall be able to separate us from your love which comes to us in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Congregational Hymn: "How Great Thou Art."

Scripture and Sermon -- Jerry

A simple insight from the writings of St. Paul, from Romans, chapter 5. "... where sin abounded, grace abounded all the more."

A nickel's worth of theology about sin and grace. Sin is much less about the things we do or fail to do. It's some about that, but more profoundly, sin is about separation. Being estranged from what is good. Grace is about being back together. Reconciliation. Relationships. Laughter and love.

All of our lives are a complicated mix of sin and grace – estrangement and reconciliation. Laughter and love.

I used to joke with Mike about his making a very good living off of selling beer and lottery tickets – sins of others if you will. But Mike's way of life brought people closer together in everything he did, because of how he did it. Grace abounding all the more. I have three stories to this effect.

Many years ago, Mike and I were playing in a two-day, two-man scramble golf tournament at the old Post course. Our last hole on the first day was the fifth, which some of you may remember was a fairly short par 5. Now in this team event, Mike was clearly the coach; I did what I was told. On the tee he figured we needed to make no BETTER than par in order to be seeded the next day at the top of the second flight. A birdie would likely put us at the bottom of the first flight, and money was at stake here.

Rather against the odds of how I generally play, I just crushed my drive straight down the middle. In getting ready to hit my second shot, I asked Mike if I should lay up, because a good three-wood from there might put us on the green, risking a birdie. Mike told me to hit the three-wood anyway. I'm guessing he expected I'd knock it out of bounds. Instead, I knocked it on the green, ten feet from the hole. We'd now have to three-putt to do no BETTER than par. Approaching the putt, I asked Mike again, what should I do. I believe his exact words were, "Aw hell, just knock it in." Which I did. I've never, before or since, put together three consecutive golf shots that were that good. We wound up at the bottom of the first flight, shot horrible golf, came in last, and won no money. So for all his strategizing on how to beat the seeding system, it turned out we sandbagged on the wrong day. Grace abounded all the more.

It was 1959 and Mike and Wanda had recently moved to Post. For many and various reasons, Mike decided to get into the liquor business. Which was a tough sell, since package sales were only legal at that time in Big Spring and Amarillo. But law can be changed. Mike did what was necessary to get a referendum on the ballot to permit package sales in Post in the precincts "across the tracks." Then he got a friend who lived on that side of town, and a shoebox full of dollar bills. They went door to door in those neighborhoods giving out the money to pay the poll tax. He never told anyone how to vote – that would be illegal. The initiative passed by about 6 votes. The election was on a Tuesday; the store was open by Saturday. The sermon at the Baptist Church on Sunday was aimed directly at him, and I'm told that's how he became a devout Presbyterian.

Of course it became "Friday Night Lights" to Post in short order from all over the panhandle. A domino effect ensued, and so it is today.

I teach a Sociology course at Tech entitled, "Alcohol, Drugs, and Society." I tell this story every semester in the context of discussing the social and political nature of drinking in America. The title of the story is, "The man who bought the panhandle wet." Mike knew I did this for years, and he was rather proud of to be contribute to higher education at Tech through this story. But there's a nearly revolutionary grace note hidden in this story. The most sinful part of "buying the panhandle wet is, by far in my opinion, the poll tax. The Voting Rights Act abolished this remnant of Jim Crow in 1965, and the Supreme Court ended poll taxes in local elections a year later. Mike was seven years ahead of his time. Grace abounded all the more.

This last one is really Wanda's story, and she can fill in the details. Mike had been out somewhere, doing something, and he was late coming home. This was long before cell phones and GPS, so no one knew where he was or what might have happened. Could have been most anything. Eventually, he wandered in the house, and met Wanda's withering gaze with these words, "You're lucky to have me."

I've heard him tell that story about a hundred times. And after the punch line, I can still hear him laugh. I'll always be able to hear him laugh.

Mike knew, and convinced most of us who got to know him, that he lived in the very best part of the best state in the country. He is the essence of West Texas.

At the end of every day, for 56 years of marriage, Wanda more or less knew he was right. She was lucky to have him. We all were. Grace still abounds all the more because God made Mike. God made Mike because He loves stories. Amen.

Benediction and Prayer – Jerry

To Honor Mike, - Go into the world in peace. Have courage. Hold onto what is good. Return to no-one evil for evil. Strengthen the fainthearted, support the weak, help the suffering. Honor all people. Speak and act with love on your lips and in your heart.

For it is into your hands O merciful Savior that we commend Mike, your servant. Acknowledge him we pray, a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock. Receive him into the arms of your mercy, into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the glorious company of all the saints in light. Amen.

Let us go in Peace.

Postlude music -- Margie