

My Life with TY ***(The Child of Donum Dei)***

Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!
(2 Corinthians 9:15)

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on Thanksgiving/Commitment Sunday, **November 19, 2017**
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I admit, regretfully, that at first I wasn't very fond of TY. TY is not the sort one warms up to early in life. Truth be known, as a child I was embarrassed to have him around. It takes time, an accumulation of life experiences, before TY is fully embraced. A toddler I was when we first met. Mom more than once introduced us, concerned that we weren't becoming friends quickly enough. She never tired in those early years of trying to arrange a friendship between us, something for which now I'm grateful, however much it irked me then.

I want to let you in just now, at the onset of this sermon, on a not-overly-clandestine secret operative in this sermon. In case you haven't yet guessed from the overall theme of our worship today, TY is my abbreviation for the simple words, "*Thank-You.*" Not a real person, but a personification of such gratitude which places the simple words "*Thank you*" upon our lips. As I tell the story of *My Life with TY*, I hope you'll reflect upon *Your Life with TY*, the gradual awareness resulting in the knowing that we live our lives from grace to grace, from gift to indescribable gift.

Well, as I said, it took a while for me to grow fond of TY. As a child, mom would urge me to say "*Thank-you*" for any little kindness that came my way. Often mom would urge, "*Now, Sieg, don't forget TY.*" Then, sheepishly, I would note TY's presence, mumbling almost inaudibly, "*Thank-you.*" "*Say 'Thank-you' to Uncle Kenneth for giving you that dollar,*" mom would said. It was a bill on which he had written, "*Siego, keep this and you'll never be broke.*" It was an Uncle Kenneth holiday trademark. I suppose he was joking but mom, I'm quite sure, wasn't. She wanted me well-acquainted with TY.

TY seemed everywhere in my house. At dinnertime, nobody could eat until we acknowledged TY. After supper dad might say something like, "*I don't think I heard any of you three boys tell mom 'Thank you' for cooking tonight.*"

"*Oh, that's right. How could we have forgotten TY? 'Thank you, mom,'*" we said, as we hustled off to play with neighborhood friends, not quite understanding what a blessing we had just experienced as a family, to be together, blessed with such abundance.

Then at nighttime, toys put away, blanket pulled snugly around me, there was TY, however coached by mom the prayer might have been. "*Thank you God for momma and daddy, for Ross*

and Johnny, and Mimi and Grandma Lula and Pop, for Creamy (the earliest pet I remember)." So it went in those early years. TY was always around, particularly in a family context, present especially at the points of family convergence.

Perhaps, I thought, TY will be a childhood companion only, that one day I would graduate from needing TY, in the same way one graduates from school to the "real" world. As we grow older, might we grow less needful of having TY around? I suppose it happened that way for me. During adolescence I didn't see as much of TY, too concerned with MY rights. Who needs TY around when a young man is trying to prove he can stand alone? TY wasn't seen as much during those years, though he did drop by occasionally. I remember TY especially around high school graduation, spending hours with him writing "*Thank you*" notes for the gifts showered on me. Honestly, though, I found that a chore I had to be forced to do.

Summer of '72 coming to a close, TY helped me pack my bags for college. "*You know, many people have brought you to this place in your life,*" TY reminded me as he folded another pair of socks. "*Yeah, I know,*" I said, "*but TY, as long as you've been around, I'm still uncomfortable with exactly how to say 'Thank You'. I'm not sure I know what to say.*"

TY smiled. "*That's alright,*" he said. "*Your parents who have sacrificed and saved, your teachers and coaches, your pastors and Sunday School teachers and youth leaders. They never expected anything in return. They just want to know you're headed in the right direction.*"

"*And if I fail?*" I asked.

"*You will, fail!*" he said. "*And when you do, give thanks and grow from it.*"

"*Give thanks for failing?*" I laughed. "*That's just what I might have expected from someone with a name like TY.*"

So I set off to school. Four years of college between Jonesboro and Conway. Three in seminary in Memphis. Then Ann Arbor for 10 years. Whenever I look back on those years, I can't do so without TY. To be sure, much was happening other than school and education. There was marriage which, by the way, precipitated another flood of '*Thank-you*' notes for gifts, but this time I had Sherry, who seemed much better acquainted with TY.

Comes the day, though, when no one has to remind you of TY's presence, when you become aware that life is lived from grace to grace, from gift to indescribable gift. Comes the day when you need no encouragement to search for TY, for he is near, and you would have it no other way. If I had to pinpoint that moment for me its anniversary would be this coming Sunday, November 26. It was around 3:30 in the morning on that day in 1975 when Page, our eldest, was born. TY greeted me outside Labor and Delivery. "*Why TY, I didn't expect to see you out here this time of night,*" I said with a smile, knowing TY knew better.

"*Really?*" said TY in mock amazement. "*Typical of you to think all it takes to have a baby are doctors and nurses. Why, I'm on duty down here at Labor and Delivery full-time.*" And when I held that baby in my arms for the first time, wondering how on earth I could be so fortunate, I was glad I knew TY. It was as if, that night, TY had become a part of me, a feeling I would

know again when Ashley was born on the Ides of March three years later, and yet again and again when we entered grand-parenthood, now times four.

“Well, I’ll be going now,” TY said at the crack of dawn, smiling large. “Don’t forget me when you’re doing three o’clock feedings, or pacing the floor on Saturday nights when she’s 17 thinking she’s all grown up and can stay out as long as she wants. Remember, she’s a gift of God – Donum Dei. As am I. As are you.”

TY takes trips with us now, by the way. When Sherry and I went to Jerusalem for the first time in 1997 and stepped out the doors of the Seven Arches Hotel on the crest of the Mount of Olives overlooking the Temple Mount, there was TY. The sun was setting behind the Dome of the Rock, nothing if not breathtaking. *“TY, I didn’t expect to find you way out here,”* I said. TY knew I knew better. *“What, are you kidding? Think I’d miss this? Not on your life. This is one of my favorite spots in all the world. I’ve stood here with millions of pilgrims, and there’s more. I can’t wait to show you all around the Galilee. You know, a good friend of mine named Paul long ago wrote, ‘At all times and for everything give thanks.’ You’re getting there, my friend,”* TY said, *“slowly but surely, you’re getting there.”*

Well, I don’t know about *“at all times,”* but TY has become more and more a part of my life. It’s easy now to go through our family photo albums and spot TY, his smiling face superimposed on each of ours. TY is never one to miss a Thanksgiving meal or an adventurous vacation. But shall TY really be our companion, as Paul said, *“at all times and in everything?”* Isn’t that a bit much to ask? Let’s face it, every life knows dark days when TY is the last person you want to pay you a visit. Isn’t there a time and a place for everything? Aren’t there times when TY is simply out of place?

It’s been nearly 17 years since my cell phone rang on that cool February afternoon. It was Johnny, my younger brother living in Dallas. I was on the way home to Fordyce from a conference at Henderson United Methodist Church in Little Rock. The joy in Johnny’s voice was unmistakable. The triplets had arrived. I was elated, and so a bit amazed that TY had time to be with me. He had told me long ago that he worked Labor and Delivery full time and it seemed, with triplets, TY should be working overtime with Johnny and Karen in Dallas. TY must be everywhere, I thought, knowing Johnny had felt the embrace of TY the same way I had many years ago. Times three! Today, three was the magic number for John Bates Avery Johnson the 3rd, the 3rd son of the 3rd son of the 3rd son, now had three children. *“All is well,”* Johnny reported. *“A girl, McKenzie Culver, and two boys, John Bates Avery IV, and the little one, only 3 pounds, Cameron Grant. The doctors say everything is fantastic.”* It was a great phone call, a great day to share with TY.

My cell phone rang again the next morning. It was a busy week with Conference matters and I was on my way to Camp Tanako in Hot Springs to preside over a meeting of the Older Adult Council. *“Let me answer it,”* said TY, who was still with me, riding shotgun, helping me make weekend plans to travel to Dallas to be introduced to my little nephews and niece. *“No, no, I’ll get it. It may be for me,”* I said. Cell phone reception was weak, but I heard enough to know something was very wrong. I pulled over to talk. Johnny was crying, something I’d not heard since we were kids. *“McKenzie and Avery have developed a serious infection. The doctors don’t understand how, but they say the situation is critical.”*

"It'll be okay," I assured Johnny, not knowing. When I ended the call and looked around, TY was gone. That night, when I returned home, things had grown worse. Johnny insisted there was no need for us to come immediately to Dallas, but Sherry and I knew we had to go right away. We hastily packed and left, and it was when we reached Hope, around midnight, that Johnny, shattered by the death of his daughter, reached us. *"McKenzie died a few minutes ago. They took her off all the machines and just let me hold her. Avery's holding on, but it doesn't look good. Little Cameron seems unaffected by the infection so far."*

When Sherry and I made it to Baylor Hospital sometime after two o'clock, we took Johnny down to an empty cafeteria. He wanted us to contact a funeral home, to make burial arrangements. How out of place! As out of place as TY would have been, whom I hadn't seen since that phone call the day before, and I confess, I was glad for his absence. His presence would have seemed trite. How can one quote Paul, *"be thankful for everything,"* at a moment like this? This cafeteria was a place of tears, not of Thanksgiving. TY was nowhere around, nor did I care to look for him. Or, perhaps he was just sitting at another table, watching, waiting for the right moment. That's grace -- unsought, unforced, approaching in its own time.

Through the week, to Avery's death on the eighth day and their funeral in a single casket, TY was absent, giving us our space. *"Will you officiate the funeral?"* Johnny asked. *"No, Johnny, I can't. There are times when ministers need to be ministered to. This is such a time. A minister leading a funeral needs to be distant enough from the grief to have an ability to see through and past grief. A minister leading a funeral needs to have TY as a companion. I'm sorry, Johnny, but I can't find TY. I haven't seen him all week."*

Sherry and I went with Johnny to visit with the minister at his church, Highland Park United Methodist Church in Dallas. She was wonderful. She asked about songs and I requested my favorite, *Hymn of Promise*. Promise, you see, is TY's sibling, another Donum Dei (gift of God) who is a bit easier, frankly, to find at times like this than TY.

She smiled and said that her office, where we were sitting, was the old office of Natalie Sleeth, the very room where she had written the words to *Hymn of Promise* after the death of a friend. So close to the place of its creative inspiration, I found myself comforted, reflecting on the third stanza, *"In our end is our beginning; in our time, infinity; in our doubt there is believing; in our life, eternity. In our death, a resurrection; at the last a victory, unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see."*

The minister's speaking became receding background noise when I recognized a familiar presence in the room. Glancing in the corner, there was TY, silent and unobtrusive, nodding his awareness of my awareness. It was a moment of sudden understanding. Gratitude was the appropriate response, understanding that TY can be our companion in more than the happy times, sparked at any moment. At such a moment of awareness, the quality of our attention sweetens. We listen.

"Don't leave us, TY. Please stay. You do belong here, with us, now, especially now. Stay with us through this funeral. We'll need you to help pick out the music and the scriptures, to guide the pastor as she speaks words of hope and comfort. She needs to know our family to lead this

funeral, and her knowledge of our family won't be complete unless she understands that you are family. I was wrong. You are not out of place. We need you now, more than ever."

As family and friends gathered, the support and love they expressed reminded us of TY's importance. And today, seeing our little nephew Cameron, Johnny's third child, recently becoming an Eagle Scout and passionate about so much – especially animals and photography, so that I can see a future career as a National Geographic photographer -- is to remember TY's transformative presence which turns the darkest of nights into the brightest day of promise.

Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Sources:

For the unique style of this sermon, personifying a spirit of gratitude into a lifelong companion named TY, I am indebted to a sermon by William Willimon, "*Gratitude*," in Pulpit Resource, Volume 31, Number 3, July - September 2003. This sermon, personifying thankfulness into a person Willimon called "*Gratitude*," was my inspiration to create "*TY*." While the form was suggested by Willimon, obviously I inserted my own story as narrative. This sermon is offered in the hope that every listener and reader will be inspired do the same. Willimon explains that his idea for the sermon was inspired by Rev. Fred Craddock in his influential book on preaching titled, As One Without Authority, in which Craddock included a sermon called "*Doxology*," creatively turning the Doxology into a person who accompanied him throughout the day.

"*Donum Dei*," an essay by Christopher Bamford in PARABOLA, Volume 27, Number 3 (Fall 2002, *Grace*).

