

LONNIE M. BENHAM

Now we come to a time for reflecting on a gift from God – a gift you in this room knew by various names: “Dad, husband, friend, grandpa, Deputy Benham and – of course -- Santa”; but a gift most people simply called, “Lonnie.”

In a few minutes, we’re going to invite some of you to come up and share a “Lonnie story” with us if you are comfortable doing so, but first I’d like to give the broad outline. And to begin that at the beginning, we have to go back to 1927.

Now, 1927 was the year that...

- The German economy collapsed and The Nazi party grew more popular as a result.
- Here in the United States, The Great Depression was still two years away: the stock market was soaring and the “Roarin’ ‘20s” were still roaring;
- In 1927, Americans used some of their then-plentiful funds to go see “The Jazz Singer,” Hollywood’s first talkie;
- Or they marveled at Babe Ruth hitting 60 home runs for the Yankees.
- In 1927, Charles Lindbergh flew the Spirit of St. Louis from New York to Paris;
- And people fell in love with the Lindy Hop, a new dance named after that record-breaking flight.

■ But the biggest news of 1927, at least in the Hubbard, Minnesota home of Lawton and Mary Benham, was the birth of their second child, Lonnie Murriel Benham.

Lonnie would be followed by six more boys, and – about the time Lawton and Mary were ready to give up on ever having a girl – TWO girls. That’s a total of ten kids if you’re keeping count.

Feeding them all was hard on Lawton’s salary as a logger. It got harder when the Great Depression arrived in 1929. The family moved to Idaho, following the vanishing job market; then to La Crosse, Indiana. Lawton was a hard man and the financial pressure made him even harder.

Lonnie may have borne the brunt of that. At the very least, he started working at 13 to help support the family and never stopped. Often his job was to assist Lawton whenever required, even if it meant skipping class to do some custodial job that his dad – then a school janitor – couldn’t handle alone. Punishment was frequent, money was always extremely scarce.

Three things kept Lonnie from sinking under the weight of it all;

1. One was his eternally optimistic and can-do nature.
2. Another was the scouting program. Lonnie was eager and able to master every skill; so after he got his 21 merit badges and became an Eagle, he earned about as many Palms as it’s possible to earn and went from Eagle Scout to Order of the Arrow.
3. The third thing that kept Lonnie’s spirits up was a friendship that started dubiously way back in the fifth grade.

Maybe you’ve heard the story: a second grade girl was sitting on a swing, minding her own business. Lonnie grabbed the swing, pulled it back and pushed it so hard she flew off and landed in the mud. Some girls would have burst into tears at that point, but this girl (Barbara Garvey was her name) got up, brushed herself off, looked him square in the eye and said, “Lonnie Benham, I’ll get even with you for that, even if I have to marry you to do it.” Lonnie must have liked her spunk, because they turned into best friends after that.

Barb became a retreat from his overcrowded dysfunctional family, and he was equally a retreat for her. She was the only child of a couple that wanted a divorce and did not want a daughter.

In Jr. High, as I’ve said, Lonnie spent a lot of time helping his father. He also helped sell farm implements and soon was delivering and helping to install parts for Allis Chalmers and Oliver tractors, Studebaker, and others.

Pretty soon Lonnie, like many of his generation, had to drop out of school to help support the family.

World War II started in 1939 when Lonnie was 12, but the war got personal for him and everybody else in our country two years later when Pearl Harbor was bombed. A few years after that, Lonnie, who was strong as an ox and undoubtedly LOOKED 18 even if he wasn't quite, volunteered for – and was accepted by – the Marine Corp. But a motorcycle accident took out his knee and he was suddenly 4-F.

Well, if he couldn't rescue the world, he could at least rescue his best friend. He asked Barb to marry him and on January 4, 1946 – three days after he turned 19 and 5 months after Japan surrendered and the war ended – the two of them were joined together by a justice of the peace. They then took off on an exotic honeymoon. By which I mean, Barb went immediately back to being a waitress and Lonnie went (equally immediately) back to being a mechanic.

They didn't have anything in the way of money, but they did have their friendship, one that was by then already more than 10 years old, and they had a steely determination to build a loving family that was nothing like the ones they'd grown up in. Barb even promised Lonnie that she would never, ever even consider divorcing him. Her motto was, "Murder, maybe; but divorce? Never." I suspect all of us would say, "It worked."

As a now-married woman, the rules back then said that Barb would not be allowed to finish high school. That was okay with her because, as an "only child" herself, she wanted to get started on building a big family where kids were loved and had lots of siblings to play with.

It may surprise you to learn that pregnancy didn't come easily. Lonnie and Barb lost their first child to a miscarriage after only a couple of months. Happily, though, Susie arrived in 1948, followed by Leonard in 1950, Mike in '52, Byron in '55, Shawn in '56, and Mary in 1958. There was another miscarriage in there somewhere involving triplets, so the family could have been even larger. But six was probably enough, especially since any child who came into Lonnie and Barb's orbit was loved and fed, AND (if circumstances warranted and parents agreed) even bathed and bedded. Some of those kids (Gene Shinabarger, Mike Weideman, Rachel Wagner and probably a bunch of others) came to see Lonnie and Barb as surrogate parents or grandparents who easily gave the love they maybe didn't receive elsewhere.

Somehow, Barb managed to find time to both work at the Norman Beatty Mental Hospital and earn a degree as a psychiatric aide, something that came in very handy when one of Lonnie's brothers desperately needed help for a wife who'd had a mental breakdown. That required a year-and-a-half detour to Minnesota. But then it was back to Indiana.

In 1960, the family moved from La Crosse to Valparaiso so Lonnie could be close to his work as a mechanic and eventually as a Sheriff's Deputy – a second job he took on as a service to the community, but also to help pay for the various and sundry bills his family generated.

Work kept him and Barb hopping, but Lonnie carved out time to be a Scout Master for three different troops. He sometimes took at least a few of the kids fishing, and all of them can remember family trips to Uncle Phil's cabin in Minnesota.

Even more, all of them can remember times when Lonnie needed a young hand to hold a light or manipulate a wrench. You'd help as best you could, because you didn't want to hear the dreadful admonition: "Are you working with me or against me?" If you were Lonnie's kid, you knew you were loved, but you also knew how to work.

You also quickly learned to be respectful of elders, neighbors, teachers, women, and – especially – mom. Lonnie was the disciplinarian (firm, but fair); and the threat, "Wait until your dad gets home," was not an idle threat for anyone who had (say) just pushed a sister downstairs or broken a brother's toy.

In 1967, the Benhams and their Grand Central Station of a household changed location from South Street to their present headquarters on College.

As kids started turning into adults and leaving home, Lonnie joined the Odd Fellows. There's probably a few men who join that organization because they like driving small cars in parades and generally being "odd," but Lonnie was primarily motivated by their mission: "To visit the sick, relieve the distressed, bury the dead, and educate the orphan." In time, Lonnie became a grandmaster and over the years helped with any number of various projects.

I'd say the same about his work here at First Christian Church. We never talked him into being an elder, but he was always ready to help with work projects. He stirred apple butter, spent countless hours

handing out food at our pantry, helped me make a couple of church floats for the popcorn festival (I know what it's like to hand him a rough sketch and watch him turn it into something better than it ever was on paper). He helped with innumerable funeral dinners, changed the letters on our sign (with Barb's help) before we switched to electric.

By the way, I know this will sound familiar. Back in the day, we had a sign-changing **team**. And if we had, say, a funeral during a blizzard and wanted the sign to acknowledge the deceased, all the young bucks on that team would pass on the job, but Lonnie and Barb? They'd truck out there thru four feet of snow in negative 10 degrees and "git-er-dun."

Actually, there are a lot of stories out there about Lonnie and his work ethic, putting younger folks to shame. One of my favorites: he once welded a bumper onto a truck, a co-worker questioned if his welds would hold. Lonnie responded by grabbing the bumper and lifting the front end of the car off the ground.

Lonnie also served as Santa Claus for umpteen years every time the church had a children's Christmas musical and the director needed a Santa for the dress rehearsal party. Watching him do that so well got me intrigued, I asked for the story behind it.

Apparently his daughter Susie once set up a Christmas party for a group that included her two children (Tim and Sheena). But when her Santa got in an accident in route to the party, Susie quickly asked her dad to try the red suit, beard, and pillow. He did so well, they asked him again the next year. And, before you know it, Lonnie started growing a Santa beard every July and playing Santa for nursing homes, daycare centers, this church, other churches. He even talked his best friend into playing Mrs. Claus and they were great at it.

Well, I lost the thread of my story somewhere in there. Back to when their own kids started growing up and moving on: Barb and Lonnie were delighted, but sad as well. Obviously sad when two of them, Mike and Susan, moved on by passing away. But also, if not sad, at least a little melancholy when the others moved on to marriages and families of their own. The house grew empty and ...quiet.

Melancholy didn't last long, though. They filled the time with square dancing and volunteer work. Plus grandkids and great-grandkids turned out to be a great delight. Further, Lonnie made it his mission to rehabilitate old bikes and give one to every kid on the planet (or at least the kids in Valparaiso). He loved fixing a neighbor's lawn mower or trailer, car, dishwasher, bookshelf, ...whatever. In fact, he didn't have a lot of faults, but one would be: as much as he loved Barb, her "Honey-do" list often took a backseat to anything a neighbor or passing stranger needed.

...Well, that's a good life, that life. It's a faithful, strong, healthy life (oh, he mangled a hand in a snow blower once, and busted his nose yanking out a transmission that – in retrospect – should have been EASED out, but by-in-large, he was healthy as a horse and usually the strongest man in the room, at least until these last couple of years of cancer and age).

Mostly, I'd say it was a life characterized by love – he and Barb DID break the cycle of dysfunctional families they'd come from. They made a loving home. And they shared that love with relatives, neighbors, congregations, communities, and – I'm quite sure – everyone in this room.

Lonnie had faith in Christ as savior, and he meant it when he took Christ as Lord, endeavoring to follow Him in loving both God and neighbor.

Well... I haven't touched on... on a lot of things, actually. On the other hand, I'm pretty sure I've touched on enough.

I'm going to end with a few words that Lonnie might want said on his behalf as part of this time. He was a man of deep faith, passionate convictions, and love for all of you: what would he say?

We'll get to that in a minute.

For now, though, it's your turn. Do any of you have a brief "Lonnie story" you'd like to share? His granddaughter, Abbey, has agreed to go first. I'll ask you to give us your name and relationship (many will know you, but some won't). Then tell us your story. Also, this works best if you get up and form a line as opposed to waiting for the person in front of you to finish before rising. So, Abbey, show us how it's done. (*Abbey repeats her name and relationship, then tells her story.*)

(when Dave feels we are done:)

There are obviously many more stories we could share, but I'm afraid it's time for us to move on. As we do, let me invite you to continue this process of passing on wonderful memories, both at the luncheon that will follow this service; and in the days, weeks and years to come. For now, though, this:

A few of the family members and I spent some time asking what Lonnie might want said on his behalf at this time. And we did come up with a few things

1. As the recipient of quite a lot of donated blood these last few months, I'm pretty sure Lonnie would tell us to give blood when we can.

2. In fact, as one who was quick to volunteer for just about any kind of community or neighborly or church work, I suspect he'd recommend that we give our service in any way, shape, or form we can. Lonnie did it in a gazillion different ways; and not only left the world a better place, but I'm sure he'd say he got a lot of joy and satisfaction out of it as well.

3. There are also quite a few people I think Lonnie would want me to thank on his behalf. He was always good at thanking his doctors and nurses (and his waitresses and ministers, for that matter), and it probably bothers him that he wasn't able to thank the people who helped him with this last difficult week. Beyond that, I know he DID say "Thank you" many times, but he'd want me to say it again. "Thank you friends and family and especially you, Barb: you loved me during the last difficult year, but you also loved me my entire life! I cherish the laughs we shared, the games we played, the work we did. You gave me a reason for living, and it was a good one.

4. I suppose it goes without saying that he would encourage us in the quest to be kind, to be compassionate, and to CHOOSE not to give in to bitterness. (We can all find a reason to be bitter, but why not spread joy instead?)

5. I'm equally sure he would tell us to enjoy our co-workers, our children, our grandchildren, our parents, our neighbors ...and our spouses.

6. Speaking of which: "Take care of Barb for me." You know he'd say that. He might even use it as an opportunity to give advice to any who are single: Marry your best friend, and the rest of life will be a glorious adventure. ...But also, take care of Barb, look after each other, AND look after yourselves.

7. And then there's one final thing the family and I agree that Lonnie would want us to hear. We feel he would encourage everyone who loves him to keep this day in perspective. Tears are sacred and appropriate, of course, but he'd tell us: "I had so many years of GOOD health. When the end came, it was painful, but I'm so glad it's over. I thank God I wasn't forced to linger any longer. I hated not being able to work. Picture me now," Lonnie might say, "meeting old friends and family members (especially my children, Susan and Mike).

"Imagine me looking for a job to do (surely even heaven has lawnmower blades that need sharpening or bikes that could use some repair). Maybe I'll do a little scuba diving or square dancing, but one big thing I'll do is join the 'Great Cloud of Witnesses,' so I can cheer for you to do the right thing creatively and well.

"No, don't feel sorry for me. Instead, live your lives fully; grab all the gusto you can; and love one another. Love God, and God's children, and God's church (and if either God's children or God's church act a little crazy now and then, know that God, who is always faithful, would tell you to love them anyway). And when it comes time for YOU to die, as it has for me, be sure of this: death is not the end of our story. Praise be to God, because of the love we have seen in Jesus Christ, death is just the start of a whole new chapter."

...Well, I think that's SOMETHING like what Lonnie would tell us. Though he would be less flowery and (let's face it) he'd segue into ten different stories before he was done. At the very least, I know he would like it if we ended this time of remembrance by revisiting the "table of memory," a table that was a part of every worship service Lonnie attended here. We're going to prepare for communion by singing another of his favorite hymns: number 546. Turn to that if you would and stand if you're able: 546, *Amazing Grace*. (All sing, followed by communion)

Dear Family and Friends, thank you for letting me participate in this service.
I hope some Sunday morning at 9:30 you'll be able to worship with Lonnie's congregational family, First Christian Church.
But if not, please keep us in your prayers, as we will you. -- Love, Rev. Dave