

Funeral Service for
Fred O. (Billy) Pitts, Sr.
Died, Tuesday, March 3, 2020
Service, Friday, March 6, 2020

We are gathered here today for the funeral service of Mr. Fred O. Pitts, Sr., known to most as “Billy” but to me as Daddy. On behalf of all of our family, I would like to thank you for your presence here today. Why are we here? When I think about funerals, it seems that there are three main reasons for them. First, we want to bring comfort and peace to those who will grieve the most at the passing of their loved one. Second, we want to remember and celebrate the life of the one who has gone before us. Finally, we want to say a word about this thing that interrupts our lives and plans, this thing we call death, and we want to put it in perspective. I hope we can do all three in our brief time together this morning.

Laverne, Debbie, Marsha, Stan, Rod, Debbie, spouses, all of the grandchildren and great grandchildren, and other family, we ask God’s comfort for each and every one of us. I think I can speak on behalf of the people here today and those who cannot be here today but have reached out to us in any way—they do this out of respect for Daddy, yes. But they also do it out of their love and respect for all of us. They seek to comfort us in whatever way they can.

And there is another who so wants to bring comfort into our lives. The fact is, he is the source of all true comfort. We don’t always understand him, we sometimes wonder why he hasn’t protected us or others as we wished at times, but I want you to know that God desires to bring us comfort, and Daddy believed in this God of comfort.

Scripture says...

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ. [2 Corinthians 1.3-5]

Let’s allow God to bring us comfort in our grief and in our mixed thoughts and feelings that almost always arise in the unexpected death of a loved one, even if that loved one was 90—I mean 90 and a half—years old. Be open to God’s presence in your life, for he is the only one we can go to who can give us eternal comforts in our losses.

Billy Pitts—Daddy—was born June 20, 1929, and he was 90 1/2 years old when he died on Tuesday. He died quickly and peacefully, and while his goal was to live to be at least a hundred, he live a good, long life. If we described him as the Bible says about some, we could say, “He died, old and full of years.” And though he died full of years, that in and of itself does not say what really needs to be said. Not only did Daddy die “full of years,” they were full years. He wasn’t satisfied to simply exist; he wanted to live.

How do you sum up 90 and a half full years in just a few minutes? It’s impossible. And I know that half-way through, if God is allowing Daddy to listen in on this, he will turn to someone else and say, “I wish he’d shut up already.” A few months ago Daddy asked me if I were going to say a few words about him when he died. I thought he was asking me to speak, but maybe he was emphasizing a “few” words.

The truth is, since that day, I began thinking of what I *would* say, and I did come up with “a few words.” In fact, I came up with just four. Four words that best describe my Daddy’s life to me. And I have stuck with them. I want you to come up with your own list of words. Yours may be different from mine. But here are the four words I offer you today...

The first word is DRIVEN.

What I mean is that he was ambitious. He wanted to make something of himself. Thomaston was a mill town in his time. There was Thomaston Mills and Martha Mill, and many people found their life’s work there. The way he related it to me—or at least the way I remember it—was that he went to work in one of the mills for about a week, and he knew that wasn’t the life for him. It was fine for others, but he was ambitious to do something on his own.

Dad began working in the construction trades, and he became aware of a new building material called “brickcrete.” He bought some machines and began manufacturing brickcrete and building houses. Later, he began to concentrate on aluminum windows and screens and doors, and Mid-Georgia Brickcrete morphed into Mid-Georgia Aluminum, his life long base of operations. My dad worked so hard and sweated so much that he didn’t bother to button his shirts. He just knotted them at the bottom and was always open chested. I never knew that was weird till years later, because that’s the way I saw him every day.

My Daddy was the most hard-working person I have ever known, but he may have met his match in Laverne. I have never heard such heretical words come from the mouth of my daddy than one day when he wondered aloud why Laverne worked so much! I remember as a boy working for him in the summer all week and asking him for an afternoon off to spend with some friends and being accused of being a lazy bum. “You’ll never amount to anything.”

My dad taught me the value of hard work. Now, he would tell you that I have never done any of it, and compared to him, he would be right, but he did teach me the *value* of hard work. He was driven to succeed.

So he was always branching out into new ventures. He started building in-ground swimming pools. He built a coin operated self-service car wash. He built houses to rent out. He acquired a coin-operated laundromat. Then he added an automatic car wash. He expanded—building car washes in Griffin and north of town and adding more laundromats, all while continuing his primary work at Mid-Georgia Aluminum. Until last year after he hit the deer with his truck, he continued to go to the office every day for a few hours, re-screening screens and doors and answering the phone and telling Stan and Rod how to do their work. He was DRIVEN.

Being driven was an article of faith with him, and let me give him the last word as I read from a letter he gave his first grandchild Matt upon graduation from college. He entitled it “Digging,” and that’s what I am calling “Driven.”

[EXCERPT] *“Remember always that your Paw Paw dug for what he got out of life. Sweat and worry and a gut ambition was all I had to look forward to. I walked 4 1/2 miles to school for 6 years, ate a cold baked potato and a syrup biscuit for lunch. Back at home and worked in the field, plowed a mule, milked 2 cows, cut wood and got in stove wood every night.”*

Then he goes on to tell other living conditions during his day and when they got electricity and other improvements and other work he had to do. He finishes it...

"I could go on but too much to tell. But things are still out there. Dig for it and go for it. I did, and it paid off. Happy Graduation. Love, Paw Paw

Yes, my dad was driven to succeed.

The next word is DUTIFUL

In a world where many shirk their duties and some think that duty is a dirty word, my dad was defined in many ways by doing his duty—that is, doing things you are supposed to do.

I don't see this in his life as a big chore the way some do. Yes, every duty can be dull on occasion. There are times we might wish we had a bit more time to ourselves, but I think my Daddy got joy and a sense of fulfilling the purposes of God by fulfilling his duty.

His duty began on the farm. And it wasn't just Granny and Papa reminding him and nagging him to do his duties. His drive caused him to willingly do his duty. Dad was the last of nine children, and he was the seventh son. He was the last to be born and the last to die. During the time when most of the brothers were gone to WWII, Daddy was being worked to death and longed to use the tractor Papa had gotten. But Papa wouldn't let him. There was a great corn field that needed work, and once when Papa was in town, Daddy took that tractor and without permission and did the work himself. Later, Papa came home and said, "Son, you need to get to work in that corn field." Daddy looked at him and said, "What do you mean? There's nothing to be done." When Papa went out and saw all the work had been done, he looked at daddy and said to him words that he would always remember with pride: "That tractor is yours, Son." Doing his duty gave him responsibility, and he loved that.

Later, his sense of duty took him into the U. S. Navy, serving alongside friends like Leon Newman and Gene Watson during the peace time between WWII and the Korean Conflict. He was always proud to have been in the Navy, serving our country, doing his duty.

Much of my dad's practice of faith in God arose out of his sense of duty, and I mean that in a good way. His mom and dad brought him up in church and instilled in him the rightness of giving God his due. And while there were short times in his life when his work projects took him away from the regularity of Sunday worship, his sense of duty brought him back, and his faithfulness to God and his church and to listening to favorite preachers on TV was stronger at the end of his life than at any other time. Reading the Bible was a duty and a habit he got from his mom and dad, and I will come back to that. His Sunday School class is sitting here today, and you meant so much to him. A few weeks ago I called him and he said, "I sure do miss going to Sunday School," and he told me how he had asked the class to raise the weekly amount they asked members to give each week for special projects from one dollar to two dollars. Someone kidded him that he was getting behind with his absences, so recently he sent a check for an amount that would cover the entire year to show them—and to show his support. And I want to give y'all two dollars today for him.

Let me mention one last way I noticed how dutiful he was in life: in the way he kept tabs on people he loved or respected. He made a weekly trek to the nursing home to bring cheer to family and friends. He was so faithful in visiting the families of friends who had died. He spent a lot of time visiting at the funeral home. It was a duty of respect. He ministered to his brothers and sisters in any way he could. He loved them, yes, but it was his family duty.

I got a message from his niece Vickie Wednesday telling how Daddy walked her down the aisle at her wedding because her dad, Daddy's brother Uhland, was already in heaven. It was his pleasure, of course, but it was part of the duty of being in a family. I wish I had time to give more examples, but I sense Dad telling me to move on...

The third word that for me describes my dad is DEMANDING

Let me begin by saying that he was first of all demanding of himself. He wanted and expected the best of himself. And he would not quit until he gave it. Let me give you the smallest illustration. I was reminded the other day that as we were growing up, Daddy used to read the dictionary every night. He would read three or four pages to better himself and would try to use new words the next day. And in that sense of the word *demanding*, it is something I wish we all had. We should be demanding as we desire to be our best selves.

But Daddy also was demanding on all those around him. One said yesterday, "He demanded your respect." He did demand that—and more. He demanded excellence from everyone.

Sometimes we would be working on a screen door or a glass door on the worktable, and it might be almost impossibly difficult to work on. He despised poor engineering that made repair so difficult. I remember Daddy working feverishly on a door and then looking up to me and saying in frustration, "The man who designed this is in hell today!" Then he would continue on until he fixed it. He wouldn't quit until it was done. He demanded better than what people often delivered because he delivered excellence in all he did.

Can I tell you something? It can be hard to be the child or the grandchild of someone who is both driven and demanding. My dad was a perfectionist. He was that way for himself and he expected the same from others. There's only one problem with that. None of us are perfect!

Looking back, we can laugh and laugh at the stories—and believe me, we do! But it could be very difficult at the time. One grandchild remembers being taught to drive a tractor by Dad. Dad was on it with him. Something happened to it, and Daddy said, "You broke my tractor!" That reminded me that once Stan and I—mainly me—got a tractor stuck in mud in a field next to the house. So Daddy wouldn't find out, we called someone to bring another tractor to pull it out. That tractor got stuck. I still remember the expression on Daddy's face when he walked into the field to handle pulling both of those tractors out!

Growing up, we were expected to make all A's. I made my first B in fifth grade, and I remember wondering if I would get a spanking. I was so glad when we discovered one of daddy's old report cards, and it was sprinkled with B's and C's!

In retrospect, we can see what Daddy was really doing. He was trying to get us to reach for the best. But he was most often a negative motivator. He pointed out the ways you *missed* it more than the ways you *made* it—or at least it came across that way. I think he believed if you were told too often that you did well, you would quit driving to be the best.

I largely got freedom from this one day when I was in high school. We were talking upstairs in our den about something he wanted me to work on, and I felt discouraged walking out of the room. Before I went downstairs, I lingered in the next room for a moment, dealing with my emotions. And I heard my dad in the next room say, "Fred really is making progress. I'm proud of him." I couldn't believe my ears! I just wondered, "*Why couldn't he tell me that?*"

When I graduated from Georgia Tech and planned to go to seminary, my dad wrote me a letter, telling me how proud he knew Granny and Papa would be that I had answered the call to ministry. That letter has always been one of my most prized possessions.

Debbie, it's always toughest being the first born. More is expected. But you paved the way for us. You were the best scholar and musician of us all. And Daddy was proud of those accomplishments and your graduating from college and your school teaching. And I know he is proud of the way you visit so many in the nursing homes just as he did.

Marsha, we always thought you were Dad's favorite. And we were right! But you were his right hand person. You worked as his office manager for years and years. That means you had to hear a lot of complaints about orders that didn't come in and people who didn't pay on time and about your siblings and everything else. You often were the go between. But Daddy did all this because he trusted you so very much.

Stan, I was named after Daddy, and you were named after Stan Musial, his favorite baseball player. But I was the Cardinal fan, and you were the one who went into business with Daddy and learned how to do everything with excellence and close to perfection. I used to think it was a shame you weren't able to have his name. He was so proud of the way you would never leave a job without it meeting your own standards. He often felt that others took advantage of you because you helped so many people. (I wanted to ask him if he ever took advantage of you, but I kept my mouth shut.) He recognized your greatness.

Rod, I didn't know you growing up, but I do know how proud Dad has been of you and your hard work and for your family for all the ways all of you all have helped him.

Debbie, I have known you even less than Rod, seeing you mainly at Christmas, but as his stepdaughter, I know Daddy has always wanted your best as well.

Yes, my dad was demanding, and we could have a lot of fun telling our stories and laughing and maybe even crying over them, but we just don't have the time.

Stan was very eloquent when he said, "He helped us all out, but he wanted us to be responsible. He came with nothing, and he had to earn everything he got, and he wanted us to know that we needed to do the same." He added, "He demanded that we do it right and do it on our own, but the truth is, we couldn't have done what we have done without him."

So many of the children and grandchildren can speak to the help he has given them.

But Laverne says it best: "He was a rough and tough, rugged, mean, hard working man on the outside, but on the inside, he was the most softhearted, sweetest man you could ever know."

And that leads to the last word: My Dad could be so DELIGHTFUL

My dad could and would brighten any room just by entering it. He had a magnetic personality and instantly became the life of any party. He had an infectious laugh and could be incredibly playful. He had a great sense of humor and could easily have people laughing with him. His was most often a wry, dry sense of humor; and he was always poking gentle and sometimes not so gentle fun at us based on our foibles but somehow making us laugh about it along with him. Once he had something on you, he never let you forget it. I can't tell you how many people mentioned this about him just last night.

My children and grandchildren love when I push them in a swing from in front, pushing them away, saying, “Don’t you come back to me,” and when they did come back, pushing them again with the same words. I don’t know where he learned it, but I learned it from my dad when he used to swing us.

He was fun to be around, but you already know that. We could be here all day talking about how delightful he was. Let me just share an annual event from our family that epitomizes this, when his delightfulness was on full display. That was at Christmas. Every Christmas he decided to give us money as presents, and it was appreciated, but the way he did it was what was even better than the cash. Each year he would design a way to hide the money or place it in such a unique setting that we would all look like greedy fools as we tried to figure out where the money was and how to get at it. It might be hidden in a sack of walnuts and the money would be inside one walnut—or more precisely, walnut halves he had taken apart and glued back together. Or it might be hidden in a Sunday Atlanta newspaper, and we had to look through all the pages and sections, or it might be in the aluminum channel of a screen he manufactured for us or in a can of Cheetos that had clearly never been opened. Or in bricks or balloons or milk jugs. How could you keep that up year after year?

But before we got to all that, he reigned over a breakfast feast when dozens of us gathered together for what was the only time in a year we would be in one place at one time. It was a time of great joy, and he took great pleasure in it. So did we.

And he delighted all of us with the stories of his life. Whether they were stories of hardship or stories of family or work or love, we would laugh or cry or both, but we would be moved. You have your favorite stories. I heard you share them last night. Let me tell you one that I first heard when I was about 30, maybe even 40. I knew that I had been a sickly child with asthma and related breathing troubles as a young child, but he told me that I was once in the hospital and Dr. Brown told him it was touch and go for me. He didn’t know if I would make it through the night. Daddy told me all those years later that he had walked out of the room and gone to a window at the end of a hallway. There, he looked up to the sky and asked God to save me, and he told God that he would give me to God if God would allow me to live. I didn’t hear that story until years after I had sensed a call to ministry, and you can imagine how it touched me. I wish I had time to tell some of your stories, too. But we must draw to a close.

My dad was driven, dutiful, demanding, and delightful. And we love him. He sometimes had a hard time saying it, but he loved us too, and we saw it more and more in the last years of his life as he thought back over his long life and thought about the love and care of his own mother and dad and the difficulties of his own upbringing and the way he overcame to achieve all that he did.

Two weeks before he died, in my second to the last phone call, I ended as I normally did, “I love you, Dad.” And though his most normal response to that, given his upbringing, was “Okay,” I was blessed that day to hear him say it: “I love you, too.” He loved us all.

Before we close, let me say a quick word about this thing we call death.

Daddy died in a quick and quiet way at this own house on Tuesday, and it is said that he got his way in this, too. It was merciful, we say. And it was. But death is not merciful just

because it comes quickly and quietly at home after a long life. Death is merciful when it doesn't win. For centuries, people wondered if death was final, if death had won.

Jesus came to show us that death can be defeated. Jesus lived a perfect life—not even my dad could do that—died on the cross for our sins, and was raised from the dead, not to give us perfect lives on earth, lives without pain and without hurt and without fear. He came to assure us, though, that he would build such a place for us, for those who look to him and trust in his Name. Heaven, not earth, is described as the place where there is no death or mourning or crying or pain. Jesus came to bring us salvation from sin and victory over death.

We endure so much here. Let us realize that God's will is not pain but to bring the promise of life. And he can overcome all our pains and even death.

Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15, ***"The last enemy to be destroyed is death."*** Later in that chapter, he writes...

Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality. But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. [1 Corinthians 15.50-57]

Daddy could not always talk about some of the most important things in life, like love and faith. He was raised in a time and a way when it was difficult to do so. But he could express in writing some things he could not express in spoken words.

Daddy's last two Bibles were given to me the other day to look over. Included in them was a diary of reading the Bible all the way through many times in his life. Family, I hope you read these. He speaks of the cleansing power of reading God's work. Let me close by reading the last entry he wrote... note the date... (I know he would want the last word.)

June 20th, 2017

I finished reading this Bible for the 17th time on my 88th birthday. I hope I live to get through it again. I hope my Lord and Savior will agree to that. I want to thank him for all my blessings, my children and grandchildren and great grandchildren. They are the greatest. I love the Lord and all my children. (Thanks, Mom and Pop), Thanks,

[And it was signed in his distinctive signature...] *Fred O. Pitts, Sr.*

Thanks be to God! Those of us who also call Jesus Savior and Lord will be reunited with Daddy one day. Let's all think today on the goodness of God who gave us this good gift of Billy Pitts.

[CLOSE IN PRAYER for comfort and for the final testimony Dad left for us.]