

RANSOMED HEART

LOVE GOD. LIVE FREE.

August 2016

Dear Friends,

That word – *friends* – feels so comforting to me right now, as I write you the kind of letter you never want to have to write, but wouldn't *not* write for the world. I need to share some words about the passing of our dear friend, colleague, comrade, abbot, Craig McConnell.

Most of you know that Craig was in a seven-year battle with cancer. A battle with some highs and terrible lows; a battle he fought valiantly. Many of you prayed earnestly for Craig and Lori over those years, and we are *so* grateful. Suddenly, back in June, there was a startling turn of events: a CT scan revealed that Craig's leukemia had transformed into an aggressive lymphoma, and barely eight weeks later he ended his pilgrimage here on earth. Craig was at home; he was not in pain; Lori was right there with him, along with his daughter Lindsey and son-in-law Jon. On the first of August, at 6:30am, Craig took his last breath, and exhaled. It had been a still morning; at that moment a wind blew into the house, lifting the curtains, swirling around the room for more than thirty minutes. Holy. So holy.

But so very hard now for those who have to say goodbye.

It all happened so fast. I hope this isn't the first you are hearing the news; we have been sharing our journey via social media and on our podcast. I'm truly sorry if you are learning of Craig's passing for the first time as you read this. Jesus – catch our hearts. There are so many things to say. I want to talk about his life; I want to talk about grief; about the centrality of hope to the Christian faith.

Death is such an assault on the soul. Having someone you love, someone you have shared so much life with, suddenly yanked from your life is a violent and disorienting experience. Death is so hostile, so explosive to God's design for us, the soul experiences it as trauma. *This wasn't meant to be*. I think that was part of the tears we see in Jesus' eyes, as he stands at his friend Lazarus' tomb – ***This wasn't meant to be***. Our souls were never meant to go through this, so we reel like a ship in high seas. I'm grateful for Jesus' tears. Even though he knows he is about to raise his friend from the dead, there are tears. That provides space for our hearts to express our tears, too.

We know we will see Craig again; we will have him forever. All the playfulness, the kindness, the wisdom, his quirky humor – we will enjoy forever. Craig is our friend, forever. What we are grieving is missing him now, in the meantime. It's the small things that wreck me. I was in his office the other day, and the little red "you have voice mail" light was blinking on his phone. I thought, *That will never get an answer*.

There is a hole in the world now. A center like no other of memory and hope and knowledge and affection which once inhabited this earth is gone. A perspective on this world unique in this world is gone. The world is emptier. (*Lament for a Son*)

The world is emptier; there is a really big hole in the world now. Craig was such a vast, colorful, rich soul.

He loved equally the Rolling Stones and killer worship; on any day you'd find one or the other cranked full-blast in his office. He loved to joke; his humor could have you gasping for air. He would also stop on a dime and listen with compassion and kindness to someone's life story. He loved sitting on the beach in board shorts and flip-flops with a good autobiography (boy did he love vacation). But he also loved being on mission, loved Boot Camps – especially his one-on-one opportunities fighting for men's hearts. He loved a good Manhattan and Lori's gourmet cooking; he also loved a taco truck and Cheetos. He loved the mountains of the high Sierras; he loved the cliffs overlooking the Pacific in Palos Verdes; he loved his back porch in Colorado and he especially loved his favorite chair, early in the morning, with a cup of coffee and the scriptures.

He would show up at our Christmas party in a Santa suit; he'd even wear it standing out on Pacific Coast Highway in California, waving to passing motorists. He had a legendary snore; we recorded it echoing off canyon walls on a camping trip (after which he totally denied it could be him). He had a jackalope hanging on his office wall, wearing mardi gras beads. Next to it are volumes and volumes of his vast library on theology, counseling, and leadership. Next to that a bumper sticker that says, "Jesus loves you. Everyone else thinks you're an ass*@!!." He loved the true Gospel – loved to teach, loved doing podcasts, writing blogs, speaking at events. Whatever counseling issue you brought to his office, you'd leave with a deeper connection to God. His life was all about Jesus, and the Larger Story.

As Craig was making the hard decision to leave treatment down in Houston, and return home for what he knew would be the end, he said, "I don't want to die fighting cancer; I want to die loving people." That is vintage Craig McConnell. And he did; he sure did. He loved people, and he loved God, right through the finish line. As I sat with him for the last time, I was able to say, "Craig - you *won*. In everything that is important, you *won*."

And now he is fighting the Great Battle from heaven's side.

Surely you understand that Craig is not dead; not even close. He's not in "eternal rest." Not asleep; not at the everlasting church service in the sky. He is more alive, more himself, and more in partnership with Jesus than ever. Either this is true, or nothing Jesus said was true.

I'm not sure what you'll do with this, but I saw him, just the other night. I was asking Jesus to show me His Kingdom, and suddenly I saw Craig. He was surrounded by a company of people. It was not a party, not his homecoming; that apparently had already taken place (this was about a week after his passing). It was a sober gathering. I saw Craig standing in the middle, and then bow his head. I saw Jesus before him, placing over his head and onto his shoulders some sort of medallion, or reward, or symbol of office. As I was sharing that picture with Alex on our team, before he even knew what I was about to say, Alex heard from God, *It was his promotion*. The day before I received an email from an ally who knew nothing of this story; the title of the email was "Craig's promotion."

Craig has joined the Great Cloud of Witnesses who “reign with Christ” from heaven’s side. He has become a general in the Kingdom.

Death, of course, tries to present itself as the ultimate reality. It is brutal, and filled with so much mockery. Death wants to make everyone think it is the *real* end. It feels so final. But it is here that Christianity shines like no other view of reality. For we know that death has been defeated. “Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die’” (John 11:25-26). This is the most stunning news in all worlds: ***Death is defeated. You live forever.***

Craig believed this with all his heart, and he is experiencing it full-blast now. Mardi gras beads and all. With some of his last cogent words he wanted to share the news of his passing himself, so he dictated a few words to his daughter:

“I want to say goodbye, dear friends. I want to thank you for the role you have all played in my life. Til Heaven, Craig”

That “til heaven” is everything. Everything.

Goodbyes are brutal; I hate goodbyes with all my being. And thanks to Jesus, thanks to all he has won for us, we know that we never actually say goodbye to a brother like Craig. Instead we say, “I’ll see you soon.” And what a difference that makes; it is all the difference in the world.

Now I am aware of the ridiculous limitations of a newsletter. I can’t do anything justice here, so let me say that we’ve devoted our four August podcasts to the story, and some beautiful words from Craig’s prior recordings. You might find those meaningful to listen to now. We are also making the video of his memorial service available online. You can find all that at ransomedheart.com.

We have established a memorial fund in Craig’s honor, to carry forward the boot camps he so loved around the world. You can make a contribution online or in the envelope provided (please mark your check “McConnell Fund”).

Finally, friends – there’s that wonderful word again, *friends* – we do need your prayers. This was a long, long journey for Lori, their children and grandchildren. They need your prayers. Craig leaves a massive hole at Ransomed Heart now, and we need your prayers, too. Thank you so much.

All mankind is of one author, and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated; God employs several translators; some pieces are translated by age, some by sickness, some by war, some by justice; but God’s hand is in every translation, and his hand shall bind up all our scattered leaves again, for that library where every book shall lie open to one another. (John Donne)

I am so deeply looking forward to sharing all those stories, our stories, when our scattered leaves are gathered up again by the Hand that wrote them all. My ache for the Kingdom is greater than ever. Come quickly, Lord Jesus.

Meanwhile—we advance the Kingdom. We hasten the day.

With much love,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'John', written in a cursive style. The signature is positioned above the printed name 'John'.

John