

LEAVE IT ALL ON THE COURT

Isaiah 35:4-6

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Someday, either I, Corky, or Robby – at least someone like us – will pull up a chair [SIT IN CHAIR FOR A MOMENT], probably around the table in the church conference room. Your family will be there – your spouse, your children, maybe even grandchildren. Your closest friends, the ones who know you best and love you most will be there. One of us will take out a yellow notepad and, with your family, will plan your funeral.

This occurs in the conference room of our church an average of two or three times a week. And the irony of the whole process is that you may live to be 80, 90, or even 100 years old, but in spending about an hour with your family, we'll be able to capture the essence and passion of your life without any difficulty. Those around us know us even better than we know ourselves. The joys, sorrows, triumphs, and failures of your life will all be summarized quickly and candidly by those who share life with you.

I know that's not the usual fare with funerals. But we don't pull out a generic "good wife" funeral or a "loving husband" funeral from the file and just repeat.

While I was preparing for a beloved member's funeral, I went to the FLC to get a drink from the vending machine. I was apparently wearing the weight of the pending service on my sleeve. "What's the burden, pastor?" a deacon asked. "Another funeral," I mumbled. "Well, haven't you something in the files?" "No," I replied with a grin, "I've never buried him before."

When we do a funeral, we focus on you, on the intersection of your life with the life of Jesus, as you are His follower, His disciple, His student.

You know what frightens me? Right now, I'm the one with the pad and pen in my hand, asking about you. But the reality is, one day someone will have pen and pad in hand and ask about me. When I look to a child and ask, "Tell me about your father. What was his passion in life?", in a self-centered way, I can't help but wonder how my daughters will answer the same question about me.

Or, I might look to an adult child and say, "Tell me something that you and your mother did that was really special. Tell me about the time you won the spelling bee and she cooked you a surprise cake. Or tell me about the time you sneaked out your bedroom window at midnight only to discover your mother was waiting on the other side when your feet hit terra firma."

Funny stories. Serious stories. Stories that summarize ourselves.

Your kids will talk about the time you were headed to Yellowstone National Park for a family vacation. You pulled over at the filling station for a snack, restroom break, and refueling, only to discover – when you're another two hours down the road – that Josh, the youngest kid, has been left behind at Pete's Food and Fuel somewhere between Powder River and Thermopolis, Wyoming.

What are our passions? How do we summarize our lives? What makes us tick? What captures our imagination and forms the path of our pilgrimage?

The one thing that has always bothered me about life? You only get one chance. You only get one life to live as a follower of Jesus. There is a single opportunity to live your life for the right reasons, the right purpose, in the right way. The author of Hebrews put it this way: "It is appointed for man once to die, and then the judgment" (Hebrews 9:27).

Oh, don't misunderstand. We get to God by grace, by the crucifixion of Christ Jesus – not by any good thing that we might do. But, at the same time, I also know that He is the master, and I am the servant. He is the teacher, and I am the student. He is the Creator, and I am the creation. And I want to live my life in such a way that the words on the lips of my Lord are, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."

What would life look like if we lived every day with all of our mind and might as disciples, as followers of Jesus? What if we gave ourselves to God without reservation?

I fear that what you and I really want is just enough religion to give us a "feel good," just enough Jesus to fit into our own agenda. We want to pursue our own purposes and passions. Sometimes we forget that we are called. And because He has died for us, we are no longer our own. We are, as Paul would say, "bought with a price" (1 Corinthians 6:20).

What would it look like if we gave Him everything every day?

My favorite sport is women's basketball. I'm not good at basketball at all. When the staff plays, I get picked last every time – and I'm their boss. But I have three daughters. And each has played basketball at some point; one still is. As I went to my girls' tournaments and sat through a Saturday of girls' games, a fan was born. And, if you are a Baylor fan, women's basketball is the most exciting sport on campus. Standing room only in an arena to watch the very best in women's basketball. Baylor vs. UConn. Baylor vs. Notre Dame. Baylor vs. Tennessee. The best of the best, battling in basketball.

The reality is that while I'm not a very good player, I do understand some of the technical aspects of the game. And, in fact, there are many experts, including John Wooden, the wizard of Westwood, who have concluded that women's basketball is truer to the game that Naismith invented than the current version of men's "ram and jam."

In watching women's basketball, I noticed one particular player. She played with more passion than any other athlete who had ever walked onto the court. She was a top national recruit from high school (rated #7 nationally by Scout.com). But she wasn't the most athletic player on the

court. She was not the tallest player on the court. She was not the fastest player on the court. She was not the best in any single category, but she was the best player on the court. Coach Mulkey told ESPN, “Melissa Jones is in a category by herself.” (Mechele Voepel, “Injury doesn’t slow Melissa Jones,” ESPN.com: Women’s College Basketball, 3/9/11) Coach Bill Fennelly of Iowa State said of MJ – even though she was playing for the opposing team – “I’m president of the Melissa Jones Fan Club! Every coach would like to have a player like Jones” (abcnews.go.com, March 16, 2011, AP). Melissa Jones said of herself, “I might not be the most athletic on the team, but I can assure you that I’m going to work the hardest...” (AGN, 3/16/2011, p. 2c)

Every time she played, every second she was allowed in the game, she gave everything that she had. One hundred percent effort one hundred percent of the time. She was willing to risk life and limb to retrieve every loose ball on the court.

She dove onto press tables, slammed into bleachers of spectators, and cast herself on the court to win. I watched her block out girls underneath the goal who were twice her size. [Slide of MJ and Danielle Adams] I watched her steal the ball from girls who were much faster than she. But she had a bulldog’s tenacity; she never quit. In every game, when she walked off the court – win or lose – she could say, “I left it all on the court.”

I want to show you a few highlights of the courage with which, the intensity with which Melissa Jones plays basketball.

VIDEO

Her junior year, when Melissa Jones had a stress fracture, the team couldn’t play without her. They were 17-2 when she was in the starting lineup, but they were a mediocre 9-6 when she was sidelined. Even with phenom Brittney Griner at 6’8” standing under the basket, they could not win unless Melissa was there “leaving it all on the court.” Her zeal was the team zeal. Her passion contagious.

Her accolades are many, to be sure. Named one of the Top 5 Players in the Nation at the Shooting Guard Position by ESPN. Big XII Female Sports person of the Year last year in 2011. By giving her all every game, Melissa transformed the Baylor Lady Bears team. They’ve retired her jersey (#5). No one in a Baylor uniform will ever play with her number again – the ultimate honor.

Last year, toward the end of the season, Baylor was in a close basketball battle in Norman, Oklahoma, playing against – for many of you, your favorite team – the Sooners. It had been a back and forth game. The arena was packed – nearly 10,000 fans. In the final few seconds, Baylor’s Odyssey Sims scores a basket, leaving Baylor up by one point over Oklahoma. The Sooners had 8.3 seconds, on their home court, to score and win. Baylor has to be careful. If you’re overly aggressive, you could send the shooter to the free throw line. And here’s the problem: Oklahoma has the fastest guard in the country, Danielle Robinson. Eight point three seconds – time to spare for Danielle’s fast feet..

Baylor sends 6'8" Griner back deep under the goal – big hands ready to block the shot. Danielle Robinson runs down the court. Griner steps in front of her, alters her path just a hair. The ball hits the iron and just hangs there for what seems like an eternity. National television audience. Packed arena. And the ball just sits there. If it rolls in, OU beats Baylor. If it rolls out, Baylor better get the rebound.

The ball rolls out! No. 3 Baylor wins over #15 OU. I watched the ending in slow motion. There are two Baylor players going up for the rebound. The one on the left of the goal is 6'8" Brittney Griner. On the right, the blond ponytail of Melissa Jones, 5'11". The ball rolls out, and Baylor wins.

That's all we saw on television. I've replayed those final eight seconds ten times, afraid every time Baylor might not win the next time I played it. What I didn't know was this: in the final minutes of that game, Melissa Jones was diving for a loose ball, as was OU's Whitney Hand, when Melissa's face pounded the floor in collision, causing her vision to quickly fade in her right eye. At first, she thought her eye had swollen shut. But then, reaching up with her hand, she realized her eye was open but she still could not see. The girl that we had watched play with so much tenacity before was now going up for that last rebound – not knowing if she would be permanently blind.

Melissa Jones plays with such tenacity that if you put a sheet of plate glass between her and a loose ball, she's going through the glass. I guarantee it.

In following games, the crowd was elated when she came back on the court after a one-game sit-out with her injury. Her story was not a Baylor story, it was a national story. The girl with grit was returning to play, even if blinded in one eye, even if wearing dark sunglasses for protection. The OU player involved in the collision, Whitney Hand, posted on Facebook, calling for Christians to pray for Melissa. Melissa's second comeback game was against Kansas, and, even with no depth perception, she hit her first three pointer on March 9, 2011, during the Big XII Tournament. Brittney Griner said she, herself, tried and couldn't hit a free throw with one eye closed. Coach Kim Mulkey said that if Jones injured her remaining eye, she would still play using her sense of smell. She's unstoppable.

The next week, the AP posted this picture of Melissa Jones. A picture of the moment of release when she hits her first three-pointer with single-eye vision. [HOLD UP PICTURE] What I didn't know when I ordered the picture was that Melissa had a habit of writing Bible verses on her hand. In fact, when I saw the blow up, I was afraid I had her grocery list there, penned on her wrist. But Brent Womble came into my office, squinted his eyes, and said, "Pastor, that's Isaiah, maybe chapter 35 or 36. And there is something about a verse 4." Anxiously, we went to the text and discovered, "Say to those with anxious heart, 'Take courage, fear not. Behold, your God will come with vengeance; and the recompense of God will come, but He will save you.'" Then the eyes of the blind will be opened ..." (Isaiah 35:4-6).

The eyes of the blind will be opened. Swoosh. Three points.

What if even in the midst of suffering, in the trials of life, you and I left it all on the court? What if every day we got up and gave Jesus all that there was of us? When the buzzer sounds, when life's game is over, we can't go back, can't replay, can't do over. In death, it's done.

What's true for basketball is true for life. One day, somebody is going to pull up that chair, and your family and friends are going to answer the question, "Did he or she leave it all on the court? Did they give God their best?"

I determined in my mind, years ago, that I would learn from everybody that I could. What we've learned from Melissa Jones is to leave it all on the court.

Kyle Idleman is teaching pastor at Southeast Christian Church in Louisville, Kentucky. In his book, *Not A Fan*, Idleman recalls an email that came into the church's office. The email was a request to be removed from the church's membership roles. The accompanying explanation was five words: I don't like Kyle's sermons.

Kyle explains that he decided to confront the ex-member to see what was behind the protest. He made a phone call. "Hey, this is Kyle Idleman. I understand you're leaving the church because you don't like my sermons."

There was a brief silence, and then some rambling. But somewhere in the middle of the conversation, the man explained the heart of his request. "Whenever I listen to one of your messages, I feel like you're trying to interfere with my life."

Well, at least the man understands. Almost, that is. The gospel does not only want to interfere with your life; the gospel becomes your life. When you follow Jesus, you take up your cross daily. That's what Jesus expected of His disciples. He wants us to crucify our own passions and live for His.

When you become a child of the kingdom, you have to decide to live for Him every day, to take up your cross every morning, to leave it all on the court and pursue Jesus with passion.

Matthew 13:45-46

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like merchant seeking fine pearls, and upon finding on a pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

The character in the parable is a merchant in the pearl trade. He knew a treasure when he saw it. Not just a common shop keeper, but a dealer on the grandest of scale – one who traveled to the pearl fisheries of the Persian Gulf or to India in search of what he might buy in the East and sell in the West for vast sums. I imagine the setting of this parable going along these lines:

The Middle East. The merchant contacts a sheik of the pearl trade and goes into a tent. Then, after the sheik is sure of his visitor, the visitor is invited to a smaller, inner tent. The sheik unfolds a soft sack and gently works the pearl out of the protective covering with his fingers.

“My goodness,” thinks the merchant to himself. He tries not to show his hand. He tries to swallow his excitement, but he swallows so loudly in astonishment that he is sure he has given his delight away to the owner.

Let’s put the parable in modern terms.

He asks the sheik what it might cost to own the pearl. “All that you have, and the price is firm.”

“Well,” says the merchant, “what I have is five smaller pearls. They are surely not the size of your great pearl, but they are fine jewels in their own right.”

“Okay,” says the sheik. “Where are your five pearls? That will be the price if that’s all that you have.”

“Well,” says the merchant, “I’ll have to go to my car in order to retrieve my five fine pearls.”

“Oh,” says the sheik. “You didn’t say anything about a car. I told you the pearl of great price will cost you all that you have. It will cost you your five fine pearls, but it will also cost you your car as well.”

The pearl merchant didn’t like the price going up, but, after all, he had agreed to pay all that he had, and the pearl was worth far more than his five fine pearls and his car all together. So he agreed and said, “Okay. I’ll go to the car and get the pearls and give you the keys to the car. I guess my friends will...”

“Friends?” said the sheik. “You didn’t say anything about having any friends. The pearl of great price will cost you everything. It will cost you your five fine pearls. It will cost you your car. And it will cost you all of your friendships as well.”

Well, the merchant did treasure his friendships, but the pearl was of such magnificent value that he thought he could pay the price. So he retorted (not having yet learned his lesson), “If I don’t have friends, I don’t know how I’ll ever get home.”

“Home? Home?” said the sheik. “You didn’t say anything about having a home. It will take your five fine pearls. It will take your car and your friends. It will take your home as well.”

“But then you’ll have everything. What will my family think if I sell everything?”

“Family,” said the sheik. “You’ve got a family? This pearl of great price will cost you your friends, your car, your family, your home – you name it. It will cost you everything if you want this priceless pearl.”

So you want to be a follower of Jesus? You want to be a part of His kingdom? You must be willing to give Him your all. There is an odd thing about Jesus – He never takes second place. He will not be second place to your friendships. He will not be second place to your job. He

won't be second place to your family. He will not even be second place to any other good thing in your life. Jesus is first place or no place at all.

The pearl of great price is worth it. He gave you His all when He died on the cross. He reserved nothing – broken body and shed blood – He gave you everything He had so that you could have everything that He had: eternal life in the kingdom of God.

Today may be the day for some of you to leave it all on the court, to take all that there is of you and pursue all that there is of His kingdom.

It is fitting that Melissa Jones closes her emails with, “All He wants is all we got.” She's right. Leave it all on the court every day.

Let us pray.