



Preach Christ

March 20, 2019

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It seemed that Rev. Van Loon enjoyed a good joke. His daughters shared stories of how he had tipped outhouses as a youth. Later in life and ministry, when someone had overstayed their visit to the manse, he was known to put a cereal box on the table, remarking “It must be breakfast time.” We heard about his Easter pranks, including having rabbits in the pulpit.

Rev. Paul Van Loon passed away on March 10, at the age of 95 years. He had remained a minister member, honorably retired, of the Presbytery, having served at First Presbyterian Church of Ottawa (Dousman) and First Presbyterian Church (Oostburg). He was Moderator of the Presbytery in 1976. When news of his passing reached the Presbytery, I began receiving telephone calls from people who remembered him. They remembered his active service in the Presbytery and his love for the church. They remembered serving on committees with him. Though the work of the committees was long forgotten, Paul remained fondly in their memories.



The pain of losing the Oostburg church also remained. Although Rev. Van Loon had retired before the church left the denomination, his passing reopened the wound of separation for some. Rev. Van Loon continued his affiliation with the church he loved in Oostburg, becoming Pastor Emeritus there. After the

congregation became affiliated with the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians, he nonetheless kept his membership in the Presbytery, which he also loved.

As we focus on the theme of reconciliation this year, I imagine Rev. Van Loon poised between First (Oostburg) and the Presbytery, in his love refusing to abandon either. I never had the privilege of knowing Rev. Van Loon. What I know of him I learned from you and from those who spoke at his funeral on Saturday. So, my imagination might be concocting some sentimental fiction. You tell me.

In the year before his death, he was interviewed by a church member. The last question encouraged Rev. Van Loon to offer words of advice to the congregation. After his decades of ministry, what would he want the church to know? “Preach Christ,” was his answer. “Preach Christ first of all.”

It came down to something that simple. Preach Christ. Preach the one who reconciled all people to God, through death on a cross and his glorious resurrection. Preach a message of reconciliation and salvation.

On Saturday, I took the soft hand of Rev. Van Loon’s widow, Mary Jane. I introduced myself and offered condolences on behalf of the Presbytery. I shared with her how much her husband continues to be loved in the Presbytery. As I spoke these words, her eyes filled with tears, and she expressed her profound gratitude that the Presbytery would come to his funeral. She understood the pain of our division as well.

In life and in death, Rev. Van Loon moved people toward reconciliation. In life and in death, he preached Christ.