

## **‘WE WILL TAKE IT FROM HERE’: HOMILY IN MEMORY OF FORMER GOV. WILLIAM WINTER‡**

*The Reverend Dr. Robert Wm. Lowry\**

It has been said that the Grand Canyon is one of those rare things in life that does not disappoint when you see it in real life.

William Winter was the Grand Canyon.

I first met Governor Winter in 1992. I was a junior at Millsaps College. He was the senior statesman of Mississippi. The short time we visited at a breakfast fundraiser for then candidate Bill Clinton sealed the deal for me. From that day on, I was a William Winter Democrat.

I did not know that morning in 1992 that 25 years later I would meet my hero again. This time our roles were somewhat different. I was a candidate for the position of pastor at Fondren Presbyterian Church, and he was the search committee’s ace in the hole. Walking into the church library that Tuesday morning, I already knew that Fondren was the place for me. Seeing Governor Winter just sealed the deal.

Over the next four years, the man I respected as a public servant became a friend.

Governor Winter was a kind of public servant almost entirely absent on the scene today. He led with a passion for justice and a compassion for his neighbor that was born not of selfish ambition but a sense of responsibility and a profound belief in the promise and possibility of a better tomorrow. Acutely aware of the advantages his hard work and education had earned, he set about

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‡ This homily was originally published by Mississippi Today. See Rob Lowry, ‘We Will Take It from Here’: Homily in Memory of Former Gov. William Winter, MISSISSIPPI TODAY (Jan. 1, 2021), <https://mississippitoday.org/2021/01/01/we-will-take-it-from-here-homily-in-memory-of-former-gov-william-winter/> [https://perma.cc/8NS5-6ZU6].

\* Former Senior Pastor, Fondren Presbyterian Church. D.Min., Columbia Theological Seminary; M.T.S., Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary at Northwestern University; M.Div., Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary; B.A., Millsaps College.

to work for the betterment of his home state. That commitment to leave Mississippi better than he found it was the cornerstone of a public life that helped shape our state for half of one century and into the next.

As I reflected on the life of William Winter and how I would possibly do it justice in a short homily, my mind returned time and time again to a passage from the Gospel of Matthew. “But when you pray, go to your room, shut the door, and pray to your Father who is present in that secret place.” The William Winter I came to know as a man of faith was as shaped by humility of spirit and gentleness of character as the politician I looked up to as a young man.

Beneath his accomplishments as a politician, a public servant, a visionary for a better Mississippi, and an advocate for a more just and equitable world was a humble and hopeful faith. It was that faith that let him see a world beyond the limitations of the moment. He was a dreamer of big dreams and when our imaginations failed us, he was there to help us see through his lens of hope.

During one of my first visits with William and Elise, the conversation turned to his time on the President’s Advisory Board on Race during the Clinton administration. Combatting racism and working for racial reconciliation are, he estimated, some of the most important work a public servant or private citizen can do. He recognized that racism does not always announce itself in the public square. It all too often hides in the structural disparities of society. The only way to fight the structures of racism is to reform the structures that promote it.

Embedded in his lifelong work for better access to education was a conviction that equality in life begins with equality in access to the tools for a successful life. He accepted as beyond debate the maxim that rich or poor, urban or rural, Black or white, every child deserves the same access to quality education. The mandates of a just society will settle for nothing less.

Acutely aware of the capacity of humanity for sin and selfishness, he challenged us to heed the better angels of our natures. He remained confident that in the fullness of time, the wisdom of justice would revive us from our trance of apathy and cynicism. In a speech at Austin Presbyterian Theological

Seminary in 2006, he warned the assembled pastors-to-be of, “. . . those most fatal, trance-inducing drugs of apathy, skepticism, and cynicism mixed in with a large dose of greed.”

This fall, when our state adopted a new flag, it was in no small part due to his leadership two decades ago. A failed ballot initiative in 2001 was merely the start of a campaign for justice that would not end until the symbol of our state represented the best rather than the worst of who we are as a people. William Winter believed in the wisdom of the people of this state to make the right choice. I am grateful providence saw fit for him to see that day come to be.

I thought for the last years that I would speak these or similar words to our gathered community as we gave thanks to God for William's life and shared in our memories, sorrow, and gratitude together. Like so many parts of our lives, the pandemic disrupted those plans. We are left to remember this gracious, compassionate, and gentle man in the quiet of our own hearts. Perhaps that is a blessing more than it is a curse. William Winter led with his heart, and I can think of no better place than the quiet of our own to prepare for the awesome privilege of carrying on his work.

In our tradition we say that William's baptism is now complete in death. His race is over, and his victory is won.

All that is left to say is, rest well, my friend. We will take it from here.

