

Cybercolumn By John Duncan: Sweet, sweet pie

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CYBER COLUMN: Sweet, sweet pie

By John Duncan

I'm sitting here under the old oak tree, thinking of pie and crust, of sweetness and hardship, of happiness and sadness. On numerous occasions over the years in this column, I have written about Ruth Stewart. She played the organ for our church many years ago. She passed away not long ago. I dedicate this column to her daughter, Kathleen Stewart.

Ruth died two days after her 96th birthday, having been born on April 26, 1910. She was born to J.L and Cora Crane. J.L. was a Baptist preacher and carpenter.

John Duncan

One March day in 1930, Ruth climbed out of the bathroom window to elope with her beau, John Stewart. John was the crust of the pie, a man of the Depression, a frugal man who worked hard for everything he possessed. And he also mixed the sound for recordings of church musicals while producing numerous albums.

John passed away one March day in 2004, four days shy of his 74th

wedding anniversary. He liked to invite me into his home and turn on Pat Robertson videos he recorded and discuss the end times. I would be a rich man if I had a dime for every time John asked me the question, "Don't 'cha think we're living in the last days?" He smoked a pipe, loved to discuss the end times, and was a crusty old character who served up opinions on life, politics, church, "the fundamentalists," "the liberal politicians," the Southern Baptist denomination, music and the end times. He swung at those topics like a first-time tennis player swinging at tennis balls, hit and miss, hit, hit, hit, miss and kabang! The big hit over the fence!

John was the crust of the pie, hard on the outside, but soft when you understood his background and his fears. He once said, "Preacher, I'm afraid." John's hardness probably resulted in deep fear, yet he had peace in Christ. It happens so in some people. He spoke of the fear of sickness and death. He died and donated his body to science and requested no funeral. You could say, in the words of the poet Percy Shelley, "Music when soft voices die, vibrates in the memory." John's melodious voice still resonates in my memory, "Don't 'cha think we're living in the last days?"

"Get some desert!" John said on our first lunch meeting. We, meaning John and Ruth and I, piled in their 1965 Mustang one June day in 1987. It was my first year at Lakeside Baptist Church, a church I have pastored for 19 years. Things were not going well, and it showed on my face. John became my ally in the war, my flashlight in the darkness, my song in the shadows, the one who tuned the joyous knob of encouragement in the dissonance of my sad-song struggle. The crust tasted good and good for many years as we shared friendship. He let me be myself. What a great blessing in life when people let you be you and the you that God created!

Oh, but where would the pie be without the crust?

If John was the crust, Ruth was the pie. Before her exit from the bathroom window, Ruth trained as a concert pianist. She used those skills to play the

piano and organ for churches most of her life. She played the organ at Lakeside into her eighties.

She once played for our late former minister of music, Randal Purvis. He was known for singing on the spur of the moment, tunes like "His Eye is on the Sparrow," his favorite. He would tell the organist what he planned to sing, never practice, and, "old leather lungs," as his friends called him, would belt out the song without the blink of an eye. Except, one Sunday all eyes blinked.

Randal told Ruth which song he was going to sing before the worship service. She heard one song, and when the time came for the special music, Randal sang another. Ruth played. Randal sang. Neither of them stopped. They played on, sang on, and plowed on. It sounded like an old tin can rattling in off beat. If I can be so kind, it was the worst sounding mess of a song I have ever heard in any worship service. Neither of them blinked, but the church blinked, fidgeted, squirmed and made faces like you see when a baby sucks on a lemon. We all laughed about it later. Life brings moments etched in the memory forever. That was one of them.

Then another Sunday, I told this great story about baseball player Babe Ruth. I told the story, rising high and low with voice intonation, when, suddenly, to make my point I gestured with my hand toward the congregation and clearly stated, "The problem with Ruth was that he made a mistake!" Ruth, the organist, looked at her husband, face ashen, and whispered, "I made a mistake. I made a mistake?" John, never one to be quiet, within hearing told her, "No, Ruth. He's talkin' about Babe Ruth. Babe Ruth made a mistake, not you!" Ruth loved to tell that story every time I saw her. She rarely forgot, saved every card I ever sent to her from church or Cambridge, England, and loved to repeat stories a thousand times. And she shared the gospel story to every living soul who ever walked in her home, called on the phone, including phone sales solicitors, and even people she did not know at restaurants. The gospel resonated within her

heart and created wonderful notes on the musical score of her life, notes of grace and kindness and love and sweetness and humor.

Ruth had a great sense of humor. One summer Sunday night at Lakeside Baptist Church, the worship fizzled and the sermon ended with a dud like the fizz of a firecracker that never ignites. I prayed, and the song commenced, "Set My Soul Afire, Lord!" The minister of music waved his arms for congregational singing, Ruth played the harmonious tunes of the hymn, and I watched and smelled a burning smell and watched, when suddenly, the organ caught on fire! The minister of music jumped over a rail, unplugged the organ, and God showed up in holy fire as the song ended! Ruth and I laughed about that for years. I now say, "Watch what you sing for, because you never know when God might just give you what you sing for!"

Ruth wrote in her Bible the plan of salvation, sermon notes, outlines and her favorite verse, Lamentations 3:22-23, "It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness." She used an old King James Version, because, in her day, that was the only thing going. And John loved the King James as much as he loved Ruth, and Ruth wanted to please John, so she used KJV.

I spoke at Ruth's funeral and shared all the change she had experienced in her life: From Model T cars to sophisticated automobiles with navigation systems; from black-and-white televisions that fit on the coffee table with rabbit ears wrapped with aluminum foil to wide-screen plasma televisions connected to the world by satellite dish; phones with rotating dials to cell phones with digital pictures; Elvis Presley to Shania Twain; big-church pipe organs with a genuine sound to synthesizers and key boards with fake sound. Ruth witnessed change. One constant remained, though—Christ.

Ah, this is life. The spring sun shines, and music still echoes in churches

and the Dallas Mavericks are in the NBA basketball playoffs, and encouragement is like a piece of pie, tasty and sweet, and life rolls on. And once in awhile, someone comes along in life that helps put some music in your own heart and the music lights a fire that sets the soul aflame with joy and peace and grace and life. And once in a blue moon, if the moon really turns blue, you, as pastor, are privileged to do funerals where you say nice things, true things, and glorious things about God and his saints. And you do it with gratitude and are humbled by it.

So when I think of Ruth, I see her smiling and grinning, and I think of John and the end times and set my soul afire, Lord.

And that's the way life goes: Make music in Jesus's name that causes the hearts of those who hear it to sing! I miss Ruth already. And next time I see her, I am going to say, "Ruth, where's John? Guess the end times have come. And Ruth, remember the time the organ caught on fire while we sang 'Set My Soul Afire'?" And we're gonna hug each other and cry and laugh and slap our knees and sing our souls to life for all of eternity. Maybe she'll say as she did when last I visited her, "Sing 'Amazing Grace.'" And I did. And I will. And we will. And we shall sing at the feet of Jesus. And we'll eat at the banquet table and eat with Jesus at the great feast, and old John will show up and say, "Get some desert!" And we will talk about old times and Jesus and worship Jesus and sing and eat the pie and the crust and laugh our souls to high heaven, because we'll be there for all eternity!

The wind blows this spring morning. The green grass waves in the wind. A bird sings and chirps the joy of morning. And God loves to hear his people make music to him. And on this morning I am. On this day I will. Don't 'cha think we're living in the end times?

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