

A sermon preached at the funeral of Ray T. Riley, Jr.
at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield CT on October 13, 2026

by the Rt. Rev. Gordon Scruton

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8. Psalm 23. Philippians 4:4-7. Psalm 46. Matthew 11:28-30.

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All of us thank you Asher for sharing of some of your memories of experiences with Ray and thank you Abi for sharing with us Rose's poem about her time with Ray as he was dying. Probably their sharing stimulated some memories of our experiences with Ray over the many years of his life. As the service continues, probably you will have additional memories of Ray come to your awareness. Sharing memories and stories are part of how we celebrate Ray's life.

The family has done a wonderful job of choosing Scripture and music that connect us with Ray's life. Today's reading from Ecclesiastes reminded us, there is a time for everything, and we don't get to control the timing of many things, like our birth, and the weather, and surprise joys, and diseases, and our death.

There was a time when Ray was born in New Orleans and lived there for a while with his family. That time with his family in New Orleans influenced his whole life, from his love of water and fishing and sailing to his love of many kinds of music, and his love of cooking and sharing good food and wine in the company of good friends.

Ray was warm and unassuming, so many people did not recognize how well read, knowledgeable and wise he was about many topics. You could not spend much time with Ray without hearing about his love of fly fishing. He was not a bragger about fishing, he simply delighted in sharing his joy in fishing, being on or in the water and in the beauty of God's creation.

In Psalm 46 we heard that classic poetic wisdom: "Be still and know that I am God." To be a good fly fisher, one has to be able to be still inwardly and outwardly: still as one enters the water so as not to scare the fish away, still and alert to the environment, in harmony with the currents in the river, aware of where the fish might most likely be, aware of the season and what flies are most likely to entice the fish to bite. Silent, grounding awareness, knowing, in harmony with creation at the moment, is the heart and soul of fly fishing and it really was the heart of Ray Riley. It was the way he lived his life. Be still and know.

I first spent time with Ray at a party at their home, about a dozen years ago. In a quiet moment at the edge of the crowd, he gently shared with me what he called a special moment of his life. He was at the fishing camp of his fishing club in Vermont, and his Episcopal priest friend was there. At breakfast, the priest very informally celebrated Holy Communion with the whole group sitting around the breakfast table. Ray did not go into details, but I could sense that he was sharing with me that in that moment, he was profoundly aware that the God-connection he experienced when he received Communion at Church was similar to the God-connection he experienced as he was involved in fly fishing with friends. Fishing was an environment where he found deep harmony and communion with God and God's creation, which in turn, nurtured a deep gentle peace at the center of his life.

In today's reading from Matthew Jesus said, "Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." Perhaps in some mysterious way, Jesus taught Ray, at a very young age, how to be still and listen and learn to be gentle and humble in heart and find rest for his soul. Being gentle and humble can be a contagious gift to people and situations where there is high anxiety. Ray often had that gift.

And in the reading from Philippians, Paul picks up on the theme of gentleness but adds the dimension of joy. Twice he says, "Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. And the peace of God will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." Ray had a gentle sense of joy which bubbled through his conversations as well as his fishing and cooking and being with friends. Even when his disease process kept him from being able to speak much, he would still occasionally offer a gentle humorous look or word. Rose said that, near the end of his life, she was in his room with music on, and she was lightheartedly dancing gently to the music. Ray had not spoken in a long time, but he emerged from the fog of his disease and said, "You're a nut." His gentle, loving joy was still present and stronger than the silencing of his disease.

While there was a time for everything in Ray's life, he certainly would not have chosen Alzheimer's disease. Yet he lived with amazing grace through the past 10 years since signs of the disease began to impact his life. I'm sure that today, he would want me to thank Rose especially for her loving faithful care of him throughout their marriage, and especially through these years of dementia.

Both Rose and Ray would want me to thank the extraordinary staff at Avery Heights for the daily loving care and dignity they gave to Ray over the years he was with them.

And both Ray and Rose would want me to thank all the family and friends who prayed for them, sent cards, visited and stayed in touch with them through these years. The support of their network of family and friends was very important to them throughout their lives and especially during these last years.

Many people tell me that they live in dread that they might experience dementia someday. If that is our fear and perhaps someday, our experience, both Ray and Rose have shown us that, while there are many challenges, there can also be much grace even while living with dementia. There can be little moments of joy and connection and love even through the challenges and long silences and disorientations of dementia. The peace of God which passes all understanding sustained them both and perhaps even deepened their love for life and each other and family and friends and care givers and God through the years they lived with dementia.

It is not always easy to find peace and find God in the challenges of life. Sometimes, like Ray, we have to fish around patiently and persistently to find where and how God's presence and peace are with us in such circumstances. But as we were reminded in the reading from Psalm 23, God is with us always and will shepherd us through whatever we face, including dementia and the valley of the shadow of death, and sustain us with God's goodness and mercy all the days of our life.

In New Orleans, there is a tradition that when a person dies, a brass band goes ahead of the casket as it is processed through the streets to the church, playing a slow, mournful kind of blues music. After the service, as they leave the church to process to the cemetery, the brass

band breaks out in a rousing celebration of Christ's resurrection power by playing and singing, "O when the Saints go marching in..."

Today, after we commend Ray to God's eternal love and care, in that New Orleans spirit and faith, the last song we will sing together, with gusto, will be "When the Saints go marching in." We will all follow the cross and Ray's ashes as we sing and process out of the church to the Memorial Garden just outside the church where we will bury Ray's ashes. After a short service there, first the family and then everyone will be invited, if you choose, to put a trowel of dirt into Ray's grave.

Then the family invites us all to a reception in the Parish Hall, which is on the other side of the church, where we can continue to tell each other our stories of Ray and listen to the stories of others. Sharing our stories, humorous and profound and ordinary, will enrich and expand our awareness and gratitude for God's gift of Ray's life, and help us walk with our grief at the loss of Ray's human presence in our lives.

As we celebrate together today, let's be aware that in the mystery of the Communion of Saints in heaven and on earth, Ray is quietly among us, smiling, delighting that we are singing and worshipping together, enjoying good food and conversation and he will be giving thanks for all of us with gentle joy, from his new place of peace in God's eternal river of love. AMEN