



One of my first insider information tid-bits from the Lutheran Church of the Covenant folk, was making sure I was aware about this Don Schirmer character, whose esteemed officiating reputation was by no means limited to the basketball court or the baseball field or any other sports arena. It also carried over to his pew on the sanctuary floor, where he would hold his stopwatch, to be sure to inform us preacher-types just how long we had droned on from the pulpit that

particular morning. So, of course, the best way to honor Don now is to keep this short and sweet. That means we cannot invite everyone up here to share all your stories about the Capt., or even to do the traditional COVID-19 rituals of video tributes or Zoom call-in's, for the countless others to share their Don Schirmer tales. For if we did all that, we would not just be here for the rest of 2020, but all of 2021 as well, for the absolute immense impact this man had on his family, friends, the city of Maple Heights, the greater Cleveland area, and our nation as a whole.

And even though I came in relatively late during his time with Covenant, I have heard my fair share of those stories: the famous athletes he hung out with in Ernie Camacho and Bobby Bonds, his fishing expeditions on Lake Erie, teaching young students about fire safety, his not being shy to throw players or coaches out of the game if they gave him too much lip, how he ran our Easter breakfast every year at the church (as his framed-picture still sits on top of that kitchen griddle), not to mention the different places around the world he sang out the Navy hymn while he served his country. Thankfully, I arrived in time to see and hear our beloved Don fill our sanctuary with his emphatic voice: especially with that Navy hymn we know as "Eternal Father, Strong to Save" and "On Eagle's Wings," both of which we will hear soon enough.

However, one position Don held that we cannot overlook is that he served as an usher for us at Covenant. We may not think that is all that big of a deal in the grand scheme of his most illustrious life-long accomplishments. Because, isn't the job description basically handing out a bulletin for the worship as people walk into the sanctuary? Except, there is a little more to it than that, and Don had a way of going above and beyond the bare minimum expectation. After all, an usher is usually the first person you see as you walk into the building. And, perhaps, you come in with guilt, maybe sorrow, even anger, or a combination of complex mixed-up feelings that you're not so sure what to do with after a topsy-turvy week. In fact, it is the job of an usher to embody the Gospel of Jesus Christ: that no matter what you bring into the sanctuary, no matter what baggage you are carrying in the depth of your soul; nevertheless, you are welcomed to take your seat, and be blown away by the unstoppable grace of it all for you.

Don ushered countless people into our humble safe-haven of God's mercy. He ushered them in with his smile that could light up all of northeast Ohio. In fact, he ushered us all in with his most contagious laughter. Come to think of it, he ushered us all in with his folksy-charm stories not to make you impressed with Don Schirmer, but to blow you away by the beauty of this life, including the greatest blessings of his wife, Frances, and all of you, who helped shape Don Schirmer to be the most precious child of God we thoroughly enjoyed. That Don Schirmer who made us all the better for it, for whatever length of time we had to spend with him.

And I can still remember his final times with us in our Covenant sanctuary, when he would get out his walker and insist on coming forward to receive Communion, because I have a feeling he knew that is how God ushered him into the grace, into the love, into the hope; to taste and see what all what happened in Bethlehem was for; that what happened with Christmas was for the whole world, yes, and it happened for Don, too. He just could not help himself, but physically persist to come forward and taste God's ultimate holy hospitality that not even death could stand a chance to stop.

And yet, as the Navy hymn so goes, it very well feels like we are in our own "peril on the sea" with our emotions over this gut-wrenching loss, including for you, Ron and Nanette. Both of you have been through your fair share in recent years, to say the least. Of course, these people surrounding you here today, and the countless many beyond these walls, will most certainly usher you into their own hearts to care for you and support you for these not-so-easy days ahead. Yes, it will not be the same for us to not hear Don belt out that "Eternal Father, Strong to Save" or "On Eagle's Wings," because Don had his way of bringing the Greatest News of Jesus Christ to life at the front of the sanctuary by the piano, just as he did from the back when he ushered his sisters and brothers in Christ into a safe haven of grace and new life. Don would sing with the utmost conviction, that no terrifying peril on the sea could ever separate you from God's love in Jesus Christ. Don would pour out his whole heart to make sure we could feel God raising us up to the heights on eagle's wings, all while his own voice soared through the rafters and into the streets of his cherished hometown.

And today, Don would still have us believe that the eternal hope from Bethlehem long ago, from the Calvary cross, from the tomb of the Resurrection, the same unstoppable hope remains just as true today as it ever has been, no matter what the baggage we carry in our soul this day. None of it is beyond this "Eternal Father, Strong to Save," who insists on raising us up "On Eagle's Wings" all the days of our life, including today. So, on behalf of his extended Covenant family: for all the music, for all the smiles, for all the laughter, for all the charm, for all the joy he ushered us into his most beautiful life, time and time again, we boldly say, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Well done, indeed!" Now, rest in the soothing eternal peace of the God who loves you to the point of death and beyond. Rest in peace, Don, forevermore. Amen!