
A Sermon for David Collins (Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip, 1966-1984)

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
At the funeral for the Very Rev. David B. Collins

Grace and peace to all of you, friends and representatives of David Collins' ministry, re-gathered today, back at this holy cathedral. We welcome you! The Collins family definitely did not desire a long and flowery sermon for David's funeral, and I suppose that is why they chose me. I am simply the dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip today, a successor to Dean Collins, and taking my part in the beautiful history and ministry of this holy cathedral parish.

We are here to remember how wonderfully and kindly David Collins played his part here, and with his family, and in the greater life of the Church. David served his country, too. In the United States Navy, he was stationed at the Brooklyn Naval Yard; and he would often pick up his young bride, Ginny, at the stage door of her Broadway show. He then served as rector and priest-in-charge of two parishes in Arkansas, before he was called to be chaplain at Sewanee, the University of the South, in 1953. He loved Sewanee, serving there for 13 years, before he was called to be dean and rector of this parish, in 1966. And he served faithfully here for eighteen powerful and inspiring years.

He brought kindness and charm to this cathedral parish. He had charisma. Of course, he had charisma in several ways, the right ways. His charisma brought Jesus to this place in new ways.

My first memory of David Collins was when I was a teenager, taking full advantage of the charismatic renewal that was exploding in various sections of the Episcopal Church. As a teenager living an hour away, I made it a point to be here when David invited the great charismatic leaders of Christianity to visit the Cathedral. And I attended, as often as I could, the Friday night Sonlight Club that was held in the lower room of this Cathedral. That room is now an indoor play area for our children!

David was a man who fully welcomed, and embraced Holy Spirit renewal in the Church. He worked with Cardinal Suenens, David du Plessis, Dennis Bennett, Terry Fullam. Pentecostal and Roman Catholic. All sorts and sizes. Speaking in tongues and interpreting tongues. David was with them all.

David was also dutifully playing his role in traditional arenas of the church. He attended General Convention as Deputy, time and time again. He chaired the Committee on Ministry during the sensitive and tense votes on whether women would be admitted to the priesthood in the Episcopal Church. It is uncertain, in some quarters, exactly how David felt about that development, but he surely guided the committee through that process with grace and excellence.

Later, he would become President of the House of Deputies, which—as most of you know—is the role meant to lead alongside the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church. In the governing structure of the Episcopal Church, the Presiding Bishop simply presides over the House of Bishops, and the President of the House of Deputies simply presides over the House of Deputies.

(Simple, right?) He presided in some quite complicated times. Of course, the Church is never simple. David knew that, too. His greatest achievement might well have been in presiding over this great parish, the Cathedral Parish of St. Philip, which

is full of theological and political and cultural diversity—and often conflict.

In his time, David was preaching and pastoring a congregation that was being pulled in various ways. Let's call them conservative and liberal, for lack of any better terms these days. David had the gift of nurturing both camps and holding all of God's people together.

Everyone here, probably, knows how he did it. It was through following one of his favorite principles. "Remember to keep the main thing the main thing." He said it over and over again. "The main thing is to keep the main thing, the main thing!" David Collins seemed to prudently hold himself away from being drawn too closely into controversies that did not need to be controversies.

And, of course, I hope we all know what the main thing was for David Collins. The main thing was Jesus. In the beginning: Jesus. Is now: Jesus. And will be forever: Jesus. The way, the truth, and the life. And David was able to hear the voice of Jesus in all sorts of situations and people. David loved people because he loved Jesus.

The Episcopal Church suffered some division after David retired from official ministry. I am sure David struggled with how he himself would proceed, and with which church he might ally himself. Some of us know more about that than others. But he stayed connected with his home, with this church, and definitely with his people. He and Ginny led Windsong Ministries, from down on the Georgia coast, in Darien; and many of you visited them regularly down there.

When I became dean of this holy cathedral, it was always my delight to welcome David Collins back. One of the first things David gave to me (besides his book, of course!) was this piece of paper. Do you know what it is? It is his personal scorecard from the very first baseball game played by the Atlanta Braves in the old Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium. 1966. I remembered that game quite well myself. David, later to become chaplain of the Braves 400 Club, knew that I shared his love of baseball; and I am proud of this memento.

I was always eager for him to preach here at special events, and certainly at funerals of old friends and parishioners and colleagues of his. He did so with charisma and grace. Charisma and grace. You know, in Greek, the words for charisma and grace are the same word.

Whenever he spoke with me, his successor, he always did so with a twinkle in his eye and love in his soul; and he would say to me, "You know, Sam, you and I are the only ones here who really know how hard it is to be dean of this cathedral." Yes, he was right. David Collins and I were bonded in that way. It has been my honor to follow in his footsteps of leadership in this huge and complicated cathedral parish. His footsteps are those of charisma and grace.

The names of the people in his parish here, long ago, have changed. The names have changed. But the people remain the same. We are conservative and liberal, rich and poor, some eager and some lazy. Some a great joy, and some a great pain. But all of us faithful. David knew all that about this parish and was able to lead with grace and love.

Finally, of course, David Collins was a man of renewal. He certainly brought renewal to this jewel of a parish, the Cathedral of St. Philip. He knew that we are always in need of renewal. And David welcomed that renewal.

Towards the very end of the Bible, in the Book of Revelation, the prophet says, "See! I am making all things new" (Revelation 21:5). I take that to mean that, even in heaven, all things are being made new. Heaven is a place where things are continually being made new. They are continually being renewed.

Yes, David Collins, bless his soul, is now in the place of ultimate renewal.

There is a place of ultimate resurrection and new life. That place is heaven itself, where David Collins resides now, the ultimate parish, and the ultimate community, full of all shapes and sizes and all sorts and conditions. And David spent a lifetime of ministry knowing, and serving, all those sorts and conditions. And now he is being made new with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven.

Thank you David Collins. Well done, good and faithful servant.

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip, 2017

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