

St. Dolly and a Life of Love

Jeremiah 15:15-21; Psalm 26:1-8; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

Dolly Rebecca Parton was born in a humble clapboard cabin in the Great Smokey Mountains of Tennessee. She was the fourth of twelve children, daughter of a humble sharecropper who worked hard for every coin that he brought home. She remembered her childhood later in song, punctuated with the line “Anything at all was more than we had, In the good old days when times were bad.”ⁱ

I’m not going to rehash her amazing musical career, I hope we are all aware of what a giant she was in that realm. Instead, I want to celebrate her life of love.

She was known as one of the kindest people you could ever meet. In the past week so many people, both famous celebrities and everyday folk, have remembered how her compassion and personal acts of kindness impacted them. She was the kind of person who made everyone around her nicer just because they couldn’t help wanting to be better after meeting her.

In a culture that often punishes celebrities for “taking sides” in issues, Dolly got away with being open about what mattered to her because she communicated them by just loving people. She celebrated her LGBTQ fans and friends openly without ever making it about herself. She supported feminist issues by celebrating other women and never letting herself overshadow them. She lived out her compassion directly in her support for people suffering from natural disasters and disease.

In a culture built on greed and avarice it has been estimated that she gave away more than half of everything she earned. The only reason she wasn’t a billionaire may be because she could not hold a dollar without putting it in someone else’s hand.

Causes she supported include cancer treatment research, wildfire relief, equality for trans residents of Tennessee, and wildlife protection.

She supported research into treatment for HIV/AIDS in the 90’s when it was still unpopular to do so.

She helped to fund the development and production of Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine in 2020.

And of course, what account of Dolly's impact on our world would be complete without mentioning the millions of books that her Imagination Library has sent out to children all over our nation. We may never know just how many kids learned to read because of Dolly Parton.

She lived a life of love that made every part of this country just a little bit better because she was alive.

Or, as her biographer Robert K. Oermann said, "She represented the best of who we can be and we need to know that and we need to carry that forward ourselves..."ⁱⁱ

Dolly lived out a life that all followers of Christ are called to.

In his letter to the Church in Rome, Paul calls the Christ Community to, "love one another with mutual affection; [and] outdo one another in showing honor." In this reading we are told to, "Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep. [and to] Live in harmony with one another;" Put very simply, whenever "...it is possible, so far as it depends on [us], live peaceably with all."

In a culture that encourages us to be suspicious and distrustful of others. In a society where it seems we must seek our own glory because no one else is going to celebrate us if we don't celebrate ourselves. In a political climate that stokes our anger and hatred towards people who hold opinions we find detestable. Paul is reminding us to begin with love. To not let the failure of relationship be caused by our own lack of compassion. To not let hatred infect our hearts. To not be overcome by evil.

Living a life of love means rejecting the urge to look out for number one, to put your own needs first no matter what. In the Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples they must deny themselves and give up their lives to save them.

You know I have never seen a picture of Dolly not smiling. She found real joy and purpose in life just being unapologetically herself and loving everyone she could.

It's not always easy to live into our calling to participate in the reconciliation of creation, in fact it will more often be a challenge than not. There is a reason that following Christ is compared to taking up a cross. But I promise you can at the very least, start with love.

In his letter to the diocese announcing his impending retirement our bishop, the Rt. Rev. Mark Lattime, said that the easiest part of his ministry among the people of this diocese, has been to love us.

I don't think I could have chosen a better set of readings for the Sunday after we lost such a beautiful human being if I had tried. I don't think any preacher could write a better story to illustrate what Paul is talking about that Dolly did with the way she lived her life.

I also don't think I could end this sermon any way other than quoting the great poet herself:

“Think of your fellow man
Lend him a helping hand
Put a little love in your heart
You see it's getting late
Oh, please don't hesitate
Put a little love in your heart”ⁱⁱⁱ

Amen.

ⁱ Dolly Parton, *In the Good Old Days (When Times Were Bad)*, January 24, 1969, Music, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JTuv8qxfOCM>.

ⁱⁱ “Remembering Dolly Parton | KQED,” August 25, 2026, <https://www.kqed.org/forum/2010101915035/remembering-dolly-parton>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dolly Parton, *Put a Little Love in Your Heart*, February 23, 1993, <https://genius.com/Dolly-parton-put-a-little-love-in-your-heart-lyrics>.