

Eulogy, John Youk, January 22, 2022

Dear friends and family of Big John Youk,

I almost apologized in my email message earlier this week about holding this service in our church and not on a racetrack, in one of the noisy sanctuaries of Big John's storied life. But then, he can't complain now, can he? He can't even make a dry joke about being brought to church and hearing our words and God's words from that enchanted place where he is now, watching this, perhaps in the company of Dale Earnhardt, who knows. The intimidator is giving him his famous sun glasses because the light of God is very bright up there. So I won't apologize. These thick old walls provide just enough quiet from the exhausts of Sumneytown Pike that we can listen to John's life and appreciate the man for who he was.

Let me start in 1970. That was the year when Big John turned 14. By then he was probably already taller than 6 foot. The first whiskers appeared on his chin and something exciting happened. It wasn't about a girlfriend or anything of that nature. No, something much more important took place, but it was first love in fact: he went hunting for the first time with his dad. John received his initiation into that male family tradition. One hour in, and he had shot his first deer and was hooked for the rest of his life. A life-long outdoorsman, he would go on many trips in camouflage, here in Pennsylvania and in places like Iowa, North Carolina and Maine. The antlers he collected tell the story, and there is still a large delivery of frozen game meat to come Dotti's way from the most recent hunting season, a posthumous greeting from the man in her life. Maybe the Deli should hold a Big John Youk Deer Jerky Sandwich Festival or something like that...

John was born on January 13, 1956 in Doylestown to John Alex and Ethel Youk. He had and still has two sisters: Esther and Rockette. Growing up mostly in Buck's County, he graduated from Central Bucks West. His grandparents had emigrated from Russia during the time of the Great Revolution and the United States became their home country which they loved and cherished. Patriotism was passed on to their grandson who was an American history buff and a patriot to boot. John's father was a Master Carpenter and taught his son the tricks of the trade. As a result, junior could fix just about anything. The women in his family instilled in him the love of cooking; he watched them prepare delicious meals. And last but not least, Big John loved cars. By the time he graduated from high school he had become a bona fide NASCAR racing fan. Later he ran his own auto body shop in West Pointe for several years and traveled the NASCAR world. How many racetracks did he visit over the course of his life? More than 50 maybe?

Over time, all of his interests and passions came together in a most beautiful convolution of events. Somehow this man found a way to become a hunting, cooking, entrepreneurial, patriotic, money-making NASCAR fan - and a legend in his own right. Few of us have the good fortune that all of our core interests come together in our jobs. John was one of the few lucky ones. I think he knew that.

In the early 1990 he often came over to the West Pointe Deli for lunch and noticed the lady that ran the ship there. He could probably tell right away what we all know in this church: she has a heart of gold; she is the hardest worker; she is just a pure soul with no deceit. John became friends with Dotti's son Kevin. Now, I don't know, honestly, I really don't know whether he became friends with Kevin in order to find a way to Kevin's mother's heart. It's probably not entirely out of the question. But the truth is, one night when he was planning to go out for a beer with Kevin, he said, "Why don't you bring your mom along?" And the rest, they say, is history, more than 30 years of a committed partnership, in which each of them had their own distinct life, their own careers but also someone to come home to at the end of the day. Someone to cook with. Someone to lean on. And that's a lot.

During his weekends on the racetracks, working for crews, providing whatever help they needed, John noticed that the guys weren't eating very well. It was usually bread and sandwich meat that had been sitting in a fridge for a while, not the healthiest food, not very nourishing and comforting or homey. So, Big John started cooking for the crews and immediately this new service was appreciated and praised by many. He had tapped into a real need and he had found his vocation. Big John became creative in a NASCAR sort of way with his down to earth choice of recipes. He cooked food that was interesting and often inspired by local ingredients and traditions but not too fancy for his customers. Over time, as this service evolved, he published his own famous cook book: "Grill like a NASCAR Pro."

As I thought about Scripture texts for this service and for this man, the many food stories of the New Testament came to mind. Our Lord Jesus had a mealtime ministry. I don't know that he cooked the food, but he understood the importance of breaking bread together, maybe even chicken wings. Christ reached people's hearts at the dinner table. One story in particular stands out to me, and that story doesn't even have anything to do with chewing food. When The Apostle Peter met Jesus after the resurrection, Jesus grilled him (pun intended!). He gave him a hard time because, see, Peter had betrayed him and denied him just days before. And he asked him three times, "Do you love me?" Peter answered each time. "I love you Lord, you know that I love you..." And then Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." "Do you love me?" Jesus asked again. Peter answered, "You know that I love you, Lord." "Feed my lambs!" Jesus said. I kept thinking that's what Big John did in his own very down-to-earth way: he fed his flock on those tracks. He made sure they were well fed and taken care of. Through his sometimes gruff demeanor they could feel his love, and it went both ways. That big guy was a beloved institution in those places and he will be missed there. Big time.

Big John turned 66 last week. That's young by our standards, but he had lived those 66 years as best he could and to the fullest. He did not feel well during the week of his birthday. He had a cold and he wasn't the type of person to get a medical check-up. He suffered a heart attack last Sunday and could not be saved. I trust that he knew that his life and soul is safe in Christ whose love and presence is felt everywhere in this world, including the racetracks and hunting trails of this country. I trust that he knew that Christ

permeates every ingredient he used to make his meals. I trust that he felt Christ in his heart.

He will be missed, Big John. He will be missed by his dear companion of over 30 years, the woman at his side. He will be missed by his beloved dogs. He will be missed by all those he fed food and stories over the last years and decades. He will not be missed by the deer population in Pennsylvania. But that's ok. For today, we are bidding him farewell with much gratitude for who he was and what he meant to us. May God bless you. Rest in peace, Big John!

Amen.