
Unfinished Business

The JOHNS-GRIFFIN DAY Sermon
by Rev. Eric Griffin

First Baptist Church, Farmville, Virginia
Sunday, April 17, 2011



in memory of

Barbara Rose Johns Powell

(1935 - 1991)

and

The Reverend L. Francis Griffin

(1917 - 1980)



MOTON

2011

Mission of the Robert Russa Moton Museum

The Robert Russa Moton Museum is committed to the preservation and positive interpretation of the history of civil rights in education, specifically as it relates to Prince Edward County and the role its citizens played in America's struggle to move from a segregated to an integrated society.

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“The Lord said to him, ‘This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, ‘I will give it to your descendants’; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.’ Then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab at the Lord’s command” (Deuteronomy 34:4–5).

This afternoon I would like to lift up as a sermonic subject the reality of “Unfinished Business.”

Our scripture lesson for today affirms the idea that some things in life will go unfinished. In other words, some things in life will go undone; some projects, some undertakings will not be completed; some endeavors will never come to fruition, never come to pass.

This may be a hard pill to swallow for some, but the simple fact of the matter is that there will be some unfinished business in this life. From that dream home that will never get built to that college degree program that will never be completed, life is such that there will be some unfinished business in all of our lives.

I can recall as a boy how my father, the late Dr. L. Francis Griffin, Sr., who is being honored here today, would oftentimes sit and talk about the dream home of his that he was going to build upon retiring from the ministry and moving out of the church parsonage up on 703 Griffin Boulevard. My father would oftentimes describe his dream home to us in vivid, crystal clear details.

My father’s dream home was going to be a four-bedroom brick ranch house, with a full basement, a two-car garage and two-and-a-half bathrooms. It was going to have a large kitchen, with an eat-in breakfast nook, a nice large den with a fireplace, a formal living room, a formal dining room and an in-home office where he could sit and read and write and leave his books just lying all over the place without my mother fussing about it.

And he was going to build this dream home on so many acres of land you know. And he was going to have horses and ponies, so that all of his grandchildren could come and visit and just enjoy themselves and have a good time. Personally, he planned



to have a Tennessee Walking Horse that he could ride around on his land and make sure everything was all right. And of course he would have a kennel for the hunting dogs too—my father was a great hunter, in case some of you may have forgotten that. When my father was in good health, he loved to go and hunt with Warren Reid and Wilson Baker and some of his other old buddies.

Well, to make a long story short, my father never did get to build that dream home of his. He never got any further than having the blueprints drawn up. And every now and then, I would walk in on him with those blueprints spread out over the dining room table, dreaming about that home of his that he believed he would some day be able to build.

That is what life is like for many of us: a story that has no ending. We toil and we labor in this life and suffer our fair share of heartaches, disappointments, setbacks and downright defeats, and then we pass from this life like a whisper in the night, not sure whether our coming and our going has made an impact or not on the lives of those whom we have come into contact with.

In the Bible, there are few figures who have embodied this sad truth so poignantly as that figure Moses, this fact that most of our lives come to a close with much of our business left unfinished, much of our business left undone. In our key text for today, in verses four and five of chapter 34 of the book of Deuteronomy, we see how Moses is summed up as a life that came to a close leaving behind some unfinished business. For the Bible says that “the Lord said to him” (meaning Moses), “this is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, ‘I will give it to your descenders’; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.” And then the scripture goes on to say that, “then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab at the Lord’s command.”

Unfinished Business: Moses led the children of Israel up out of the land of Egypt from under the oppressive rule of Pharaoh in Egypt land. And then he stayed with that people, through 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, ministering to them, being their leader, and going through life with them.

When the people went astray and worshiped that golden calf and committed the sin of idolatry, it was Moses who brought them back to their senses. When God was about to abort Israel’s journey to freedom, Israel’s journey to the promised land altogether, it was Moses who courageously and boldly stood in the gap for the people of Israel and interceded for them on their behalf, pleading, begging with God to let them continue on their way to freedom land.

And now, what was going to be Moses’ reward for all of his faithful service as God’s servant to God’s people? Moses would not be the one to take the children of Israel over the Jordan into the promised land, the land of Canaan.



Oh, Moses would see the promised land, and greet it from afar, but he would not set foot on that land, after having led the people of Israel all of the way. Talk about a bitter pill to swallow! Talk about your defeats, your heartbreaking moments, your setbacks in life—that was one of the greatest unfinished tasks ever to be recorded in the annals of human endeavor, this communication that Moses heard from the Lord, recorded here in our scripture lesson for today: “I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.” Talk about disappointment—this was heartbreak city there in that moment! We, some of us, can relate to Moses and what he felt in that moment, but I doubt that many of us have ever felt anything worse than what Moses must have felt. For here in our text, Moses had reached the apex of his career, he had come to that high moment, that high point in his career, when he was supposed to experience that great, crowning achievement, only to have someone, who was the Divine in this case, say to him, “no, uh uh, not this time—it will not be you who will bring this project to fruition.”

I would submit to you that this story about the unfinished business of Moses’ life has great meaning and significance even for us today. Especially as we pause to reflect on the meaning of the life of Leslie Francis Griffin, Sr. does this story about Moses’ unfinished business in life carry with it a special meaning and yield for us some valuable insights.

What are some of the insights that we can glean from this story about the unfinished business of Moses’ life that might prove useful to us in our lives? Both individually and collectively—what might we learn from Moses about life and coping with the hard fact of life that some endeavors we will never be able to see through to the end? What does God want us to learn from the story about how Moses did not get to finish his work of leading the children of Israel to the promised land?

One thing we can learn from Moses that might help us cope with the fact that not all of our endeavors in life will turn out victoriously is the idea that no matter how great we are, failure will also come our way. Go with me briefly to verses 10 through 12 of our scripture lesson again if you will, so that we might confirm this idea that no matter how great you are, your life will meet with some failure, some defeat.

“Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses,” our scripture lesson says, “whom the Lord knew face to face.”

“He (meaning Moses) was unequaled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.”

Did you see that? That is the final estimation made of Moses for posterity’s sake, for the generations that would follow Moses: “Never since has there arisen a prophet



in Israel like Moses...,” the Bible says. “He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform....”

And yet, despite the fact of how great of a personage he was, Moses still had met with his failures in life. For one thing, he wasn’t even going to get to finish this business of leading the children of Israel into the promised land—that was a big enough failure, if you are looking for evidence that Moses had met with his failures in life.

But let us not forget that there had been that little business, also, of the previous set of tablets bearing the laws of God having been destroyed—we don’t want to overlook that incident entirely, do we? When Moses grew angry with the idolatrous behavior of the Hebrew people he slammed the two tablets bearing the first set of commandments that had been handed down by Yahweh God.

And what about what happened back in Egypt when Moses tried to convince Pharaoh through various signs that he performed that Yahweh God was really behind this Exodus that Moses was about to lead the people on? Moses didn’t really look all that impressive to Pharaoh when the magicians came behind and performed some of the very same tricks, did he?

As we consider this subject of the unfinished business of life, my brothers and sisters, and how it relates to the life of Moses and also to us, maybe we can find comfort in the fact that when we are in the process of doing some things in life, when we are in the process of carrying out certain tasks in life, we might meet with our fair share of failures.

I know that as my father tried to provide leadership to the African-American citizens of Prince Edward County through that whole crucible of the fight for equal school facilities, and then the *Brown* court case and the subsequent school closings that followed, my father certainly met with his fair share of failure and defeat. Looking through the lenses of God’s Holy Word and with the benefit of 20/20 hindsight, we can now see that it was okay that my father and the others who were trying to figure out what to do about the situation in Prince Edward suffered their moments of failure and defeat—the fact that my father and others involved in the school situation made mistakes at the time was okay, for even Moses, who was deemed as being the greatest prophet of all time in Israel’s long walk with God, met with his setbacks and failures while he was going through this life; and not only did he meet with his setbacks and failures, but there was some business in his life that simply went left undone.

I can tell you, as one of the children who were at home with my father in the latter days of his life, that he agonized much over those individuals in Prince Edward County, both African-American and White, who lost out on an opportunity to complete their education as a result of the school closings in Prince Edward County. My father shared with me once that he felt as though he failed those young people in



this county who became a part of the so-called lost generation. It was on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the *Brown* decision, when the media was flocking to Prince Edward to interview my father, that my father confessed to me that he didn't feel as though any victory had been won in Prince Edward. And for that reason, my father was very reluctant to even give interviews to the media.

And now a statue has been erected of him which stands in this state's capital of Richmond, designating him as one of the great African-American heroes of Virginia history.

That is the story of life. Mingled in with our victories in life are the bitter dregs of our failure and defeat that can sour the celebratory moments of even our greatest accomplishments. We can find comfort in the fact, however, that Moses, when he walked on the face of the earth, met with his failures and defeats. And yet, the final judgment that was made on Moses' life was that he was the greatest prophet in the history of Israel, ever.

We, all of us, can find affirmation in this idea that no matter how great we are, failure will still come our way in life: for those of us who may have ever felt as though we were failures as parents, failures as a husband or a wife, failures as a student or a worker on the job, we can be encouraged by the knowledge that after all is said and done, and when the record is recorded for posterity's sake, the consensus may be that we were in fact great at the things in life that we were charged to do, even though we may have met with our fair share of failures.

Translate this into a practical lesson for the occasion today, Preacher, if you will?

For those who have labored long and hard to make the completion of the Moton Museum come to fruition, I would simply say to you that I know you have had to face your moments of failure, defeat, heartbreak and sorrow. But as the French say, *C'est La Vie*, such is life. The payoff may not come until years later down the road, when someone will walk through the halls of the completed Moton museum, some school-aged child perhaps, and his or her life will be transformed by the story that will be preserved there for the generations yet to come.

But there is something else that we can take from the story of Moses and his unfinished business in life aside from the fact that his failures did not detract from his greatness, and that is the idea that even though people may forget what we have done, God will never forget what we have done.

Did you all hear what I just said? I really want you to listen to what I am saying. This is the second point that I want you to get concerning this subject of the unfinished business of Moses' life: even though the people may forget what we have done in life, God, the Almighty Creator of Heaven and Earth, will never forget what we have done.



Look at what the scripture says in verses five and six of chapter 34 in the book of Deuteronomy and perhaps you will understand what I am talking about when I say that even though the people may forget what you have done, God will never forget what you have done.

“Then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord’s command. He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Bethpeor, but no one knows his burial place to this day.”

Remember, we are talking about Moses now, who was the greatest prophet of Israel, ever, and yet, the scripture says, no one knows where Moses is even buried.

How soon they forget, my brothers and my sisters. It doesn’t matter what you have done. It doesn’t matter that you may have made great sacrifices or given of the best of your youth, or any of that. Oftentimes in life, it is the sad case that a little while after we are gone, just a little while after we are dead and gone, the people do have a tendency to forget what we have done. For the Bible says that “no one knows [Moses’] burial place to this day.” Oh they mourned for Moses for a little while—for thirty days I believe the Bible says—but then the Bible goes on to say that after the thirty days were over, “then the period of mourning for Moses was ended.”

The people will forget what you have done. Am I not right? Can I get a witness?

We have forgotten so much that men like my father did for our sakes and for the sake of the betterment of humankind.

We’ve forgotten that men like my father, and M. Boyd Jones, who was the principal at the time of the Moton High School strike, and John Lancaster, who was the County Extension Agent for the African-American farmers of the County during those times, paid dearly as some of the key leaders of Black people in this county. M. Boyd Jones was forced out of his job as principal, John Lancaster, too, eventually lost his job. The bank foreclosed on the land that my father and mother were trying to buy where my father hoped to build that dream house of his one day. But not only this, one bill after another suddenly became due and payable in full on the credit that had been extended to my parents as my father was identified as the principle adult leader of the African-American students of Prince Edward County.

Oh, let’s not whitewash what happened—let’s not participate in revisionist history; the gains that African-Americans made in this country in the 1950s and the 1960s came at a tremendous cost and sacrifice on behalf of some courageous people.

The people will forget the work that you have done, I tell you, but thank God that He doesn’t forget what we have done.

Still, there is so much about the life of L. Francis Griffin, Sr. that seems to have become forgotten.



Some of us may have forgotten or may not have even been aware that he served as the President of the State Chapter of the NAACP, and that he provided leadership not only to the African-American citizens of this county in their struggle for equality and justice, but he provided leadership to African-Americans all around this state in their struggle for justice.

Some of us may have forgotten or may not have been aware that he served as an adviser to two sitting presidents of this nation on issues of racial matters.

Some of us may have forgotten or may not have been aware that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once referred to my father as a Giant amongst men and a modern social prophet.

Some of us may have forgotten or may not have been aware of the breadth and the depth of my father's intellect, and how he could speak intelligently on national and international issues, and how he was a champion for people's rights wherever people were being oppressed when he was still living.

Some of us may have forgotten or may not have been aware of how loving and compassionate my father was, and how he loved all young people, black, white, red, and brown, and how he loved to hear what was on young people's hearts and minds.

We as human beings have a tendency to forget people's accomplishments and what they were like when they were here on this earth, but thank God that God doesn't forget. And in fact, many of our accomplishments have already been written down in the great book of life that is stored up there in heaven, and beside our names there may be an asterisk, with an adjective attached to that asterisk, which indicates that we were one of God's greatest servants.

Well, there is one more thing I would like to say about the Unfinished Business of life, aside from the fact that no matter how great you are, failure may still come your way, and that even though the people may forget what you have done, God will never forget. The final thing I want to say to you about the unfinished business of life is that it is the design of the Creator that someone else will finish the work we have begun.

Someone else *will* finish the work we have begun—this is the way the Creator intended for human life to be from the beginning.

The sooner we accept this fact, the better off we will be, mentally and emotionally: someone else *will* finish the work we have begun.

In the case of Moses, that someone else who would finish his work was clearly stated in the text: Joshua, son of Nun, who was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him. He would be the one who would finish the work Moses had begun.

For those of you who know your Bibles know that where our scripture lesson for



this afternoon ends, here in the book of Deuteronomy, the story of Moses and how Joshua completed his work of leading the children of Israel into the promised land is completed over in the book of Joshua.

Beginning with verse 1 of chapter 1 in the book of Joshua, we find these words: “After the death of Moses the servant of the Lord, the Lord spoke to Joshua son of Nun, Moses’ assistant, saying, ‘My servant Moses is dead. Now proceed to cross the Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that am giving to them, to the Israelites. Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, as I promised to Moses.’”

Someone else will finish the work we have begun. This is a fact of life; it is a fact about the created order of things that is irrefutable.

For just as Joshua was to complete the work that was initiated in Moses, who had been called to lead God’s people into the promised land, Paul and Peter and the other Apostles would complete the work that was begun in our Savior; those of us who are Christians will, in turn, complete the work of the Apostles.

And then, someone will complete the work that we have begun. I don’t know who that someone may be.

In the case of my father, much of his work that he began has already been carried on by others and is continuing even till this day to be carried on.

For I know that my father is proud of the work that Armstead “Chuckie” Reid has done through his work as an elected official, and how he has stayed in this area and labored so hard to help Farmville and Prince Edward County to heal and to move into the future.

And I know that my father would be proud of Carl Eggleston and his role of leadership in the community over the years since my father’s passing and the accomplishments he has made as a businessman.

And my father would be proud of how Reverends James and Doris Ashton have come to this community and not only nurtured the congregation of this church, First Baptist Church, over the years, but also have labored to help bring about healing and reconciliation in the larger community of this town and this county.

And I’m sure that my father would be proud of Lacy Ward, and how he has been able to lead the project to complete the Moton museum such that the day of its completion seems to be a realizable goal.

When we look back on the progress that has been made towards achieving racial reconciliation in this town and in this county, the gains have been tremendous, considering how tension-filled race relations were even when I was a student in the Prince Edward County School system. No one would have ever believed, for example, that Prince Edward Academy would be able to overcome its history and become



integrated back then, but now, today, as the new Fuqua School, that institution has become integrated.

I don't know—my brother Skip and I have debated this matter over and over again—but I believe that my big brother is right on this point and I would have to concede that he is wiser than I am about this matter. For as my brother Skip has reminded me, we must not forget that in addition to our father having been a drum major for justice, he was also an agent of God's reconciling love as well. And so I must admit that if my father were alive, he would, no doubt, visit the Fuqua School and talk with the young people there if he were invited to do so.

Certainly it is not just to demonize the father for the hastily thought out comments of the son. In my heart, I believe that my father, were he alive, would desire for the complete healing and reconciliation of all of Farmville's and Prince Edward County's citizens to take place, and that he would have loved to see the day when representatives from all of the important institutions in this community could come together and sit at the table together and work on a project like the Moton Museum together as they have done.

Our work that we have begun in this life will be completed by others. As I prepare to take my seat, I would simply like to say to all of you who remain here in Prince Edward County that it is up to you to determine what the future of your County will be like and look like in terms of race relations in the future. You don't need members of the Griffin family to tell you what to do and how to proceed. You don't need members of the Johns family to set your agenda for you any longer. The spirit of Leslie Francis Griffin, Sr. is alive and present in many of you and it is you, those of you who remain here as citizens of this county, to determine how far you are willing to go in working towards healing and reconciliation. Certainly, the current students of the Fuqua School should not have to bear the guilt of the mistakes that were made by those who have long since been gone from the face of this earth.

For the story of life is the story of unfinished business. Each of our lives is like a story waiting to be finished. Ultimately, it is God and God alone, he who is the author and finisher of life and of death, who has the power to write the final words about each of us in the book of life. Then and only then will the stories of our unfinished lives be completely finished.

In the interim period, it is up to each of you my friends to work towards finishing the business which that great man, that Giant of a man, my father, L. Francis Griffin, Sr. began many, many years ago, when he agreed to become the leader of his people in their struggle for justice, right here in the four walls of this church, right here within the four walls of this house of the living God. Amen. And amen. And may God's richest blessings be with you all now and in the days ahead to come.





The board and staff of the Robert Russa Moton Museum wish to acknowledge the assistance of the Triumph Baptist church and the First Baptist church in making the Johns-Griffin Day program a success.

We thank the members of the Johns and Griffin families for sharing their loved ones with the community and for allowing them the opportunity to be agents of change. It is their memory we honor.

We wish also to thank the member institutions of *Our Schools, Our Vision*—Hampton Sydney College, Longwood University, Prince Edward County Public Schools, and Fuqua School.

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