

## **“BUCK O’NEIL: Loving You!”**

#1 in the “GREAT SOULS, GREAT FAITH” series

Text: John 15:12-17

Sermon by Dr. Robert Lee Hill

Sunday, May 29, 2011

8:30 a.m. (Chapel) , 9:20 a..m. and 10:45 am (Sanctuary)

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Good morning, friends! Good morning and welcome to the launching of a brand new sermon series, “*Great Souls, Great Faith,*” in which we’ll explore the faithful lives of contemporary exemplars.

Today and over the course of the next four Sundays, we’ll reflect on and learn from the witness of: (1) the greatest baseball man who wasn’t elected to the Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, (2) a humble man who preached to birds and became famous as the author of one of Christianity’s most treasured prayers and the creator of the original living Christmas nativity scene, (3) the founder of the Catholic Worker House movement, (4) a great Christian martyr who challenged Hitler and the evil of Nazism, and (5) a man whose startling embodiment of Christian principles still inspires us today even though he wasn’t a Christian.

Those looking for doctrinal purity or dogmatic hegemony here will surely be disappointed as we proceed through this series. But for those eager souls wanting to know how other souls have lived their faith, how they have prayed, how they have struggled spiritually, and for those wanting to garner insights from the paths others have walked and for those wanting to gain wisdom from the hard-earned maturity which others have won, this series can be enriching experience.

The Great Souls included in this series are neither the only ones nor the premier ones. But they are people who have distinguished themselves with passion, care and rare sensitivity along their faith journeys. They have kept close to God and to the reality of the blessings which can come when you maintain such closeness. By keeping close to such Great Souls, our faith can be enlarged.

What is plainly clear to all who are seeking to be faithful is the fact that *we can use all the help we can get.* This series is offered with the hopes that it will find a secure

hold on the souls of every one who wants to increase their encounters with God and their experiences of the gifts of faith as they open themselves to new light.

In this first sermon in the series we're focusing on Buck O'Neil and the sentiment he expressed in his signature song, "*Loving You!*"

For those of you who have yet to become baseball fans, let me assure you today's message still has much to intrigue and inspire you. For we are talking about one of the greatest advocates of goodwill the earth has ever seen. To many people, both here in Kansas City and around the globe, Buck O'Neil was the embodiment of graciousness and caring love.

Buck began life humbly in Florida. He was born on November 13, 1911, in Carrabelle, Florida. At the age of 23, Buck left Florida and started playing semi-pro baseball with teams like the Miami Giants, the New York Tigers, the Shreveport Acme Giants, and the Zulu Cannibal Giants. During this time he teamed up with the legendary Leroy "Satchel" Page. In 1937 he signed with the Memphis Red Sox of the Negro American League. Then the Red Sox traded him in 1938 to the Kansas Monarchs where he would play and manage for 14 years.

In 1956, he became a scout for the Chicago Cubs, where he would discover talent like Billy Williams and Lou Brock, both of whom would become Hall of Famers.

In 1962, the Chicago Cubs named him as coach, making him the first black coach in the Major Leagues.

In 1988, after his long service with the Cubs, Buck returned to Kansas City to become a scout for the Kansas City Royals. He also worked tirelessly to establish the Negro League Baseball Museum in Kansas City and served on the Museum's Board of Directors.

It was during this time that Buck came to national prominence through his association with and starring role in Ken Burns' award-winning *Baseball* television series on PBS.

Buck died peacefully on August 5, 2006, at Research Hospital. A public celebration of his life was held at Municipal Auditorium and a smaller home-going service was

held at his home church at Bethel A.M.E. Church here in Kansas City, Missouri.

Four months later, on December 7, 2006, he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President George W. Bush. Buck's brother Warren received the posthumous honor in Buck's stead.

### *Kansas City Remembers Buck*

Buck is remembered in Kansas City in some significant ways. At the entrance to Forest Hills Cemetery on Troost here in Kansas City, there is a monument honoring him, close by his grave site where he is buried next to his wife, Ora Lee, who died in 1997.<sup>1</sup> And out at Kaufman Stadium, right behind home plate, four rows up, a special seat has been designated as the Buck O'Neil Legacy Seat and is awarded to 81 different individuals for each home game every year.

On July 25, 2008, a statue of Buck was placed at the entrance of the Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York, and the Buck O'Neil Lifetime Achievement Award was established.

Of course, you can read all about Buck in two superb books, one, his memoir, *I Was Right On Time*,<sup>2</sup> and the other, *The Soul of Baseball*,<sup>3</sup> by Joe Posnanski, who has probably scrutinized and studied Buck more carefully (and more lovingly) than anyone writing in sports journalism anywhere.

### *Buck Lived a Life of Love*

But more important than any of his baseball and civic accomplishments was the simple, profound fact that Buck lived a life of love. For all of the adult stretch of his 94 years, Buck lived a life of love. Beginning in Florida, and all through the baseball barnstorming days on the road and throughout his tenure with the Monarchs and then the Cubs and then the Royals and then with the Negro Leagues Museum, Buck lived a life of love. He embodied exquisitely and eloquently the love ethic as we have heard it in the gospel of John, in the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter: *"This is my commandment that you love one another, as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.... I am giving you this commandment that you might love one another."* Now Buck lived out that ethic in his own unique way. He lived it out first and foremost by dismissing the option of bitterness.

*He Lived a Life of Love by ...*  
*Dismissing the Option of Bitterness*

Buck had every right to be bitter, but he didn't find much reason to be so. He consistently dismissed the option to be bitter about anything or any one. In the degradation of segregation of Florida, he didn't get bitter, he got better as a ballplayer and he got out of his celery field overalls and into a baseball uniform. When he didn't get to play in "The Show," having only ever played in the Negro Leagues, he didn't express bitterness. No, he dismissed the option of bitterness and instead worked to get others into the game and then later Negro League stars into the Hall of Fame.

*"Waste No Tears for Me..."*

At Cooperstown, on the glass behind his statue, just beyond the entrance to the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum, there's a statement of Buck's:

*"Waste no tears for me.*

*I didn't come along too early.*

*I was right on time."*

And when he missed being voted into the Hall of Fame by one meager vote, he was surely crestfallen inwardly. But he didn't show it outwardly. And he carefully and strongly dismissed the option of bitterness. "Ol' Buck's going to be all right," he said on the day he heard the news that he wouldn't enter into the Hall of Fame. "*Ol' Buck's going to be all right. Buck's already in the Hall of Fame. I'm in the Friendship Hall of Fame.*" He said he never hated anyone. And the only thing he ever hated was cancer, because it took his wife Ora Lee from him.

Which leads us to the second way he lived a life of love. Buck lived a life of love by delighting in the daily.

*He Lived a Life of Love by ...*  
*Delighting in the Daily*

Every day was a beautiful day to Buck. And every person was beautiful to him. He could regard anyone he met as beneath him or lower than himself. He would do as Jesus did, simply calling them - literally *anyone* who greeted him around the town - his friends.

His attention to the daily and his devotion to the loveliness in the ordinary was most clearly evident in his loving relationship with Ora Lee. Having met her on Easter Sunday in 1943 in Memphis, Tennessee, and after they got married in 1946, when he came back from serving in the Navy in World War II, Buck and Ora Lee loved and exulted in each other for 51 years.

Buck loved Ora Lee with devotion and dedication when she was discriminated against in downtown Kansas City stores, when she tried to shop for a hat.

And he loved her with fierce loyalty and a special grace, when Ora Lee was discovered to have cancer. *"Buck would call her years of fighting the disease 'the greatest 15 years of my life.'"*<sup>4</sup>

They were the greatest because of the sacred dailiness they shared together, precious meals in their home, especially when they had company and she treated everyone like royalty. What was special to Buck was not the mounting acclaim that was accruing to his reputation and presence in Kansas City and across the nation.

Now, Ken Burns may have made him a household name after the PBS Baseball television series. But the house and home and life he shared with Ora Lee – in all of its dailiness – were his greatest graces and best blessings. Above and beyond dismissing the option of bitterness and delighting in the daily....

*He Lived a Life of Love by ...  
Daring to Love Others First,  
before anything else.*

We were privileged to host Buck here at Community on numerous occasions. At a steak cookout sponsored by the Men's Fellowship. During a COLOR's Juneteenth celebration, in a Martin Luther King Interfaith Service. And he always came dressed impeccably and ready to go, with a huge smile on his face. He always seemed interested in your welfare and what you were doing. He'd have a quick quip or two, and he would take as many pictures as you wanted. But he was genuinely interested in what was going on with you, what was going on in the world, and how he and you, how we could make it better. He really did live a life of love by daring to love others first, before anything else.

This was even true at the end of Buck's life, when his strength was ebbing away, when he had lost much of his zip and most of his pizzazz. Even then, though, he expressed his love for others. Emanuel Cleaver recalled for me how when he went to see Buck at Research Hospital two days before he died, he could hardly get Buck to talk about his medical situation. Instead, Buck turned the tables on Emanuel and asked about his children. *"How's Evan doing?"* And *"Is E3 preaching at St. James now? Is he really preaching there or is he half-stepping?"*

In the midst of his extremis, he dared to love others first, to call attention to their lives, to be concerned about the welfare of others over and above his won welfare. *"He had the ability to reserve thinking about himself and express care for others first,"* Emanuel recalls. And when Emanuel told me that story, I couldn't help but think of the text for this morning's message: *"No one has greater love than this, that to lay down one's life for one's friends."* And when I told Emanuel that John 15:12-17 was my text for this sermon, he said, *"Oh yeah, that's him, that's Buck, all right."*

In Buck O'Neil we have beheld not a perfect person but one who sought to live as perfectly as he could a life of love that dismissed the option of bitterness, that delighted in the daily, and that dared to love others first, before anything else. It was natural, then, and perfectly in tune with the gist and grit of the gospel that Buck's famed theme song was "Loving You." May we learn to sing it in our own day, in our own way, and in our own key. And when we do, do not be surprised if there arises from the celestial realm beyond a heavenly and harmonious echo and a great and glorious laugh from Buck O'Neil. AMEN.

#### NOTES

- 1 The exact coordinates for the location of Buck's and Ora Lee's graves are **Section 103 – Row 3 – Grave 12**.
- 2 Buck O'Neil, with Steve Wulf and David Conrads, *I Was Right on Time: My Journey from The Negro Leagues to The Majors* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996)
- 3 Joe Posnanski, *The Soul of Baseball: A Road Trip Through Buck O'Neil's America* (new York: William Morrow, 2007)
- 4 J. Brady McCollough, "Buck and Ora were about love," *The Kansas City Star*, October 8, 2006.