

ConnECtion2020

EC's 80th *ConnECtion* over 40 Summers

A Letter to EC

By Jerushah Duford

Although I wish so much I could be with you in person, I prefer you each be safe and healthy and we can collectively hope our paths will cross in the near future. I hope that you excuse the informal nature of this writing, however I want to speak with you as I would if I was standing in front of you. That would include some smiles, and laughter and sarcasm — but most importantly — some encouragement and truth.

Despite having never had the privilege to meet Ralph in person, his work is near and dear to my heart and I consider it a privilege that you are allowing me to share my heart with you.

As I write this our country is suffering. It feels amiss to speak to you about anything of relevance and not recognize the state in which we currently find ourselves. Nearing the downturn of a worldwide pandemic was the videotaped death of George Floyd. Multiple cities across the country are being torn apart by riots of people who have simply had enough. My heart is breaking for the African American community and for any and all marginalized communities. I was born into a prominent Christian family as a white heterosexual woman. So, the passion I have always had for the marginalized community is not something I came across from experience. I recognize the privileged life I was born into a, not only a loving, but supportive, God-fearing family, but also into the Graham family.

You see, my mother is the oldest child of the late Rev. Billy Graham. For the first decade of my life at least, I had very little understanding of what that meant or the legacy in which it carried. My grandfather (whom we affectionally referred to as “Daddy Bill”) was just that — a grandfather. He took me on dates and sent me Christmas cards and attended my school programs. Yes, it is true that I was first pictured with him in *People* when I was 12-years old, but when you grow up seeing your grandfathers face in the checkout line at the grocery store, normal feels different to you. It wasn't until my own relationship with the Lord began to grow as a

young teenager that I really started to appreciate the weight of my grandfather's message and the platform he had to share it.

At the same time, during those early years (when I thought Johnny Cash in our living room was normal!), I was practically born with a passion for those whose road was harder than my own. I know this passion was Spirit-given because my first memory was as a six-year old, knowing in my heart that one day I wanted to give a home to an orphan. There were no circumstances in my young life at that time that would drive me toward serving and loving the marginalized, but I knew this was my path and I know now it was God-breathed. Although my family was privileged, we had an example of a man who never saw himself as important. Yes, my grandfather saw that he had value to the Lord, but that was simply the only status that made any difference to him. I have memories of watching him sit down with a volunteer at one of his Crusades and simply ask her about her kids; or clear his own plate at an event held in *his* honor. When he was given the Congressional Medal of Honor he was praised by Presidents and dignitaries. A list of his accomplishments was announced to a very crowded and influential room, and when it came time for him to stand up and accept his honor, he humbly stood (almost confused by the accolades, as though he wasn't even fully aware of them), and simply said "*I take every word that has been said about me in this room tonight and lay them down at the feet of the Lord*". Can you imagine what it is like to walk life with a man so iconic and yet so humble? The sentiment often makes me tear up because the people who walked with Jesus in the New Testament knew exactly what that feels like. I had the remarkable privilege of having a man who saw everyone as equals in the eyes of the Lord, live that out in *every aspect* of his life, right there in front of me.

You see how the current state of our country and the inequality of race, class, gender, and sexuality is so incredibly grieving to my heart? I am here to hopefully encourage you and remind you that this grieves the heart of our Lord even more. Scripture is dripping with admonishments to the self-righteous and to those who see themselves as better than others. Galatians tells us we are all one in Christ Jesus; Romans tells us that God shows no partiality; and the *very first* chapter of the Bible tells us that we were created in His image. How did we get it so wrong? How are black men not deemed as important as white men? How are women not deemed as important as men? How are homosexuals not deemed as important as heterosexuals? and most importantly, why is the church not doing better? I am asking myself these questions and some

days I am *so grieved* by the lack of answers that I want to stop fighting. However, if any of you are familiar with the “Enneagram” (see, this is just one more rabbit trail I could go down if we were able to be together in person...), you’d know that I am an “8” on the scale . This is known as the challenger, the one who fights for the underdog. When you have a Jesus like I do standing behind you, and an example like I did in my grandfather, you don’t quit. You simply don’t know how to.

Again, because I can’t be with you I don’t know your stories. I had looked forward to sitting across from many of you over a meal and hearing your heart. I want to know about your families and your dreams and your hobbies. I want to know where you have been and what your struggles are and what offers you hope and how I can pray for you. Because I am writing to you without hearing your specific journey, I can only address the universal struggles that we all face: I can address the mask that I assume many of you had to wear for years, and I imagine some of you still do. I can address the feeling of being misunderstood, or the constant need to feel like you owe an explanation to others about your life and choices if they do not fit their narrative. I can address the universal feeling of a void or insecurity or hiding from who He made you to be. But I can’t address any of that without also addressing that you and I are perfect in the eyes of the one who created us. We were made in His image and sometimes — just sometimes — the world (and yes even the church), gets it wrong. There are fires erupting in every major city this week due to the fact that society, the same society that has often made us feel less than — got it *really wrong*. So my encouragement to you today (and to myself most days as well) is to allow the Lord to be your barometer. Allow the Lord to determine who you are and your value and — spoiler alert — *He loves you*. We say that so often that I think we become callous to it, so I will say it again: **HE LOVES YOU.**

Not “cleaned up you,” not “straight you,” not “white you” or “successful you.” Not the version you show your employer, or the version you bring to Sunday night dinner with mom. He loves *you* and there simply is nothing you can do to make Him take his eye off of you or remove His affections for you. PERIOD.

I had the honor and privilege almost my entire life of being in the presence of and being loved by a man who loved Jesus more than anyone I know and that gave me privilege and

opportunities and an incredible legacy. But *you* have the privilege of being in the presence of — and being loved by — the King of the Universe, and that gives *you* the privilege and opportunity and legacy that no one can ever take away from you.

Do not allow the world, yes sometimes even the church, to be your barometer of value and love.

I want to connect with as many of you as possible so please email me or direct message me on Twitter (@jerushahruth) so I can hear your stories, walk with you, fight for you, and pray for you.

It would be my honor.

Sincerely,
Jerushah Duford