

Y'all know I love me a drag queen. You may've even heard me mention one or two or a hundred. In Bible Study last week, we heard the wisdom of Jinkx Monsoon. When the computer got hinky, I quoted Bianca Del Rio. I've got a collection of saints' candles on my grandpa's old Bible depicting all manner of beat faces and hair high enough to tickle the Pearly Gates. But my lifelong favorite drag queen, her candle sits dead center framed by a cross just behind her. I'm talking, of course, about Dolly Parton. Preaching about Dolly today should be required of everyone with access to a pulpit. 'Cause Dolly's a funny figure, no pun intended. She was discounted by those who made assumptions about her like a book with a cover. She knew that and made a point to beat people to the punch, making fun of herself before anyone else got the chance. Her combination of humility, wit, and savvy put her wig and shoulders above anybody else in the rooms she entered, which was quite the feat at a whopping five-foot-nothing.

Maybe you loved her for her music, maybe you loved her for the books she sent your kids, maybe you loved her for her humor, and maybe you loved her for how she was. The woman was brilliant and disarmingly kind with a soul even more beautiful than what the eye could see. There's a lifetime of well-sung stories to tell, but I'll spare you the full gamut. There's potluckin' to be done, and I know better than to stand between y'all and that spread. But indulge me, if you would, for a few minutes if you would. There's still some Dolly needs telling.

When she was little, there was a certain kind of woman Dolly was enamored with. Little kid Dolly idolized what she called the "town tramp," the only woman who got gussied up with big hair and fake nails and wasn't held down by housework and a passel of kids. She may've been trash, but trash was the most glamorous thing Dolly'd ever seen. And so, when Dolly grew up, she adopted that style. Some called her the tramp, some called her a fashion icon; she called herself an eyesore. She said, "it costs a lot of money to look this cheap." When critiqued for being nothing more than a dumb blonde, she parried with classic Dolly wit: "It doesn't bother me...I know I'm not dumb, and I also know I'm not blonde."

I grew up in a rare Southern household that held Dolly in mixed regard. She was a great songwriter, but she was a bit too like that town tramp for my family's puritanical tastes. If only she'd been more modest, maybe she would've been okay with my kin. But she wasn't, and their obsession with purity culture kept them from witnessing the most accessible saint we're ever likely to see. There's a certain kind of Christian thought that denies the goodness of joyful people. That kind of Christianity assumes joyful people got to be joyful thanks to the nefarious draw of sin ("sin" being whatever your local preacher didn't like). Only the truly enlightened (though they'd never use such a pagan term) rose above the base side of their humanity where what looked like joy was actually poison disguised and what was actually poison masqueraded as demure deference to a sadistic higher power.

But Dolly wore a version of herself that looked and acted and sounded just exactly like she wanted. Dolly was fully herself, strong and defiant and brilliant and open, and that was a problem for the women in my upbringing; she was a problem for the men in my upbringing, too, but for different, blush-inducing reasons. If you took Dolly for what she was on the surface, she could seem fake or coy, like the incarnation of rhinestones. Folks like my kin disregarded her for what she was shallowly and completely missed both her brilliance and her incredibly deep faith. This is where the irony of the Christianity I grew up around comes into focus. See, Dolly never shied away from her faith. She believed in Jesus and the goodness of real people trying to make it in a complicated, morally grey world. She sang about betrayal and abortion and suicide. She didn't glorify the hard

parts of life; she acknowledged them, and acknowledging the hard parts of life meant understanding that sometimes what causes shame isn't always sin so much as the cruel pressures we put on each other.

So, Dolly wasn't outright cherished in my household, and because she wasn't outright cherished, my household was rare. Throughout the South, especially in her home state of Tennessee, Dolly wasn't just loved, she was revered. I don't know if this is true, but I heard that a state legislator once got voted out solely for threatening to remove a statue of Dolly from the state's capitol. Dolly naturally bridged political gaps, and she was the rare topic not up for debate. You just don't mess with Dolly. Which is fascinating. It seemed the world more-or-less universally agreed that she was such a rare, pure, and genuine soul that she needed protecting from what rankles the rest of us. Think about that for a second: someone so faithful and so kind that even the unfaithful felt obligated to guard her from the evil that longed to tamp her down. I heard someone say, "I'm an atheist. I don't believe that heaven's real, but I know, I know Dolly's there."

Now, Dolly was a master of letting other people judge a book by its cover to her benefit, and in a world dead set against women succeeding, that was a mighty power. I don't know a single story where she got outsmarted. But also, I don't know a single story where she came out looking bad. She had a way of using her curated appearance to disarm people, and once disarmed, to get some good, ol' fashioned love of God and love of neighbor plugged in. There are only a handful of people who've had such widespread appeal and so little scandal. I'm 100% convinced Dolly was one of the best Americans in our history, and, more importantly, one of the best Christians in our history. She was an accessible theologian, an expert lamenter, a faithful witness, and a humble light. No matter where life led her, she always returned to a seemingly effortless, default state of joy.

But of course, it wasn't effortless or even default. It was practiced, not put on or performed, practiced in the same way as monks and nuns. She wasn't joyful 'cause that's just who she was; she was joyful because she learned to search for joy when everyone else assumed there was none to be found. You want old time religion? It's not the hardline stuff my family bore; it's Dolly with her choice to find God's joy in the world God gave us with the people God put us around. Take a look at that Romans reading, and tell me that's not Dolly to a D. And get comfy, I'm gonna do the whole thing:

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

I'm gonna be honest, I thought about taking out the vengeance and wrath stuff, but the more I think about it, the more it still works. Not because God *will* exact vengeance and wrath, but because we shouldn't. *If* it's going to come, it's not for us to decide. Dolly was big on loving people across difference and leaving the judging up to God. She rarely said more beyond that except to say that the existence of evil comes less from God and more from us. God, she said, "gave us free will -- we're the ones who screw it up all the time."

I could talk Dolly all morning, and I'm guessing if I sit at the right table for lunch, I will. But for now, I'll leave you with this. We need models of the Christian life well-lived. It helps to see the sometimes pollyanna words of guidance actually work in the real world through a person that otherwise seems just like us. Dolly was

a rare talent, don't get me wrong, but she was a rare talent wrapped up with a coat of stitched-together rags and holes in her shoes. We all know her, or someone kinda like her, and if someone we know can be a saint, a life lived a little more honestly, a little more faithfully, a little more Christianly's in our reach. Even for auburn-haired vixens and lost girls on bridges.