

Chuck Colson's memorial steeped in prison themes

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c. 2012 Religion News Service WASHINGTON (RNS) Prison Fellowship founder and former Nixon aide Chuck Colson was memorialized Wednesday (May 16) at Washington National Cathedral in a service steeped in Scripture and prayers about prison and redemption.

Colson, who died April 21 at the age of 80 after a brief illness, was known as Nixon's "hatchet man" and served seven months in prison on Watergate-related charges. But at the 90-minute service, he was recalled as a transformed "friend of sinners."

"Chuck was not perfect, but he was forgiven," said the Rev. Timothy George, the homilist and dean of Samford University's Beeson Divinity School.

Colson, a former Marine captain, was buried with full military honors at a private service at Quantico National Cemetery on April 28.

The cathedral service drew about 1,200 people, from members of Congress to evangelical luminaries such as GOP strategist Ralph Reed, Focus on the Family founder James Dobson and Christian singer Steven Curtis Chapman.

His daughter, Emily Colson, recalled how her father's faith transformed both him and his family and how he cleared his schedule to spend time with her autistic son.

"Today is a celebration of my father's life but today is also about us," she said. "I encourage you to continue the work God has begun through my father's life. Do the right thing, seek the truth, defend the weak, live courageous lives."

The service included prayers for Colson's family and for prisoners across the globe.

George noted that Colson, who became a Christian shortly before heading to prison, clung to the same Scriptures that were read amid the hymns inside the storied

gothic cathedral.

"He never forgot Jesus's words, 'I was in prison and you visited me,'" said George.

Chaplain Danny Croce, an ex-convict who came to lead a prison ministry after receiving a scholarship in Colson's name, spoke of his fellow ex-con's tradition of preaching at prisons on Easter Sunday and sending thousands of volunteers into prisons across the world.

"Though they don't give you a Bible in school, Chuck made sure you had one in jail," said Croce, founder of New Hope Correctional Ministry in Plymouth, Mass.

Speakers recalled how Colson, a Southern Baptist, reached out to people of other denominations in the Evangelicals and Catholics Together initiative, as well as the movement that sprung up from the Manhattan Declaration, a 2009 manifesto opposing same-sex marriage and abortion and affirming religious liberty.

He was also remembered for his ability to ask for forgiveness and forgive others.

"I had known no one who could forgive so completely as Chuck does," said former Minnesota Gov. Albert Quie, who was Prison Fellowship's acting CEO in the late 1980s.

In her tribute, Emily Colson said her father left instructions that the service should be joyful because he expected to be enjoying the presence of God.

"I don't want people to be sad," her father instructed, "because I believe with every ounce of conviction in my body that death is but a homecoming."