

## *ADAM'S SANDCASTLES*

*“We are like children building a sandcastle. We embellish it with beautiful shells, bits of driftwood, and pieces of colored glass. The castle is ours, off limits to others. We’re willing to attack if others threaten to hurt it. Yet despite all our attachment, we know that the tide will inevitably come in and sweep the sandcastle away. The trick is to enjoy it fully but without clinging, and when the time comes, let it dissolve back into the sea.”*

Pema Chodron

*“God’s created sand and water become the tools we use to tell people walking the sandy beach, carrying their own life’s stories, that Jesus loves us and hears our hearts.”*

Ann Wooten

When I saw the hurt in her eyes—a mother’s eyes—I knew she had a story to tell about the sandcastle that she and her husband were so skillfully crafting.

For me, it was a special encounter on one of my typical morning walks along the ocean. But this morning, and this walk, and this encounter, would change me forever.

It all began with my morning routine: crossing the street in front of our high-rise resort building, down the blue-plastic walkway, past the dunes, into the sand and down to the ocean. Then to one of my favorite places to commune with God and thank Him for the endless waves rolling in, the constancy of His creation, like His Holy Spirit that saturates us daily.

This morning, for some reason, I walked northward along the beach. Toward the Cherry Grove pier with its middle span missing—like a hockey player’s grin—a grim reminder of a recent storm that had ravaged the beach a few weeks earlier.

I saw them shortly after I headed up the beach. Two figures huddling over a sand figure of some sort.

I walked over to them, my curiosity gene pinging. Then I noticed the sandcastle. But this was more than your run-of-the-mill sandcastles that I've seen kids build on the beach a hundred times since I arrived.

This sandcastle was a thing of beauty.

A piece of art.

A woman was carefully carving the scallop-shell type roof atop the castle's main turret. A man—I assumed to be her husband—was packing sand around the castle's base.

“What a beautiful sandcastle,” I said.

“Thank you,” the lady replied, “it is a tribute to our son Adam.”

“What a blessing,” I said, admiring the beauty of the sandcastle and the loving attention to detail.

I turned to walk further up the beach, to my prayer spot, thinking as I walked by the roaring waves what a tribute of love I had just witnessed.

The woman was still there on my way back down the beach. She introduced herself as Ann. “I like to write stories about special encounters like this on the beach,” I began, “please tell me more about Adam.”

“He was a wonderful son,” Ann said, “the kind of boy everybody liked. His smile always lit up any room he entered. He loved helping people.”

By then her husband, Ronnie, returned. They showed me pictures of elaborate and beautiful sandcastles from beaches stretching from the Carolinas to Florida. There was even a huge dragon, several feet long, each an artistic masterpiece dedicated to their son's memory.

“All of our sandcastle sculptures feature five things that were special to Adam,” Ronnie explained, “his name Adam, a cross, a four-leafed clover (Adam had a special knack for picking them out in the yard), sand-drizzle trees, and Psalm 116.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I have lifted some excerpts from Psalm 116: I love the Lord because He hath heard my voice and my supplication; the sorrows of death compassed me ... then called I upon the name of the Lord: O Lord, I beseech thee, deliver my soul; Gracious is the Lord, and righteous, yea our God is merciful; Return into thy rest, O my soul: for the Lord hath dealt bountifully with thee; *for thou hast delivered my soul from death, mine eyes from tears, and my feet from falling*; I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living; I will take the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the Lord; *Precious in the sight of the*

I prayed for Ann and Ronnie, the specialness of their memories for their departed son, and the love behind their tributes for Adam. After I finished, Ann thanked me. “We do this as a testimony to Jesus Christ,” she said, “whenever someone comes over to look at our sandcastle, we get to speak of our love for Adam, and the faithfulness of our Lord.”

I thanked them for the unique spiritual experience and left them to finish their tribute sandcastle honoring Adam.

We exchanged contact information.

I couldn't sleep that night. All I could think about was Ann and Ronnie and how to tell their story in a missive, in a way that honored Adam's memory and their love for him.

The next morning as I walked up the beach, they were at it again. I walked over. Ann was working on a new sandcastle. “The other one collapsed shortly after you left yesterday,” she said. It was a blustery, overcast morning on the beach. She wore a red bandana.

“Please tell me more about Adam,” I asked. “I want to tell his story.”

“He was such a good boy,” she began, “I loved him so much! He had two children—one newborn—and a new job,” she said, her voice starting to quiver.

“The pressure was just too much for him.” Then she told me in rapid-fire fashion about an attempted suicide, a frantic trip to the hospital, an excellent doctor who seemingly pulled him back from the brink of death—”

Adam's last words were “I'm a little bit tired,” Ann told me later in a note, “I think I'll rest a little. I love you momma. Tell daddy I love him and to watch for deer.” As Ann told me about Adam's final moments while we were standing on the beach, her eyes glistened with wetness, holding back a torrent of tears, love, hurt, anguish and guilt. I had stumbled into Ann's secret sanctuary—the place none of us want to reveal to strangers. “He coded out. He told me he loved me.”

Adam was 37 years old.

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*Lord is the death of his saints; I will offer thee the sacrifice of thanksgiving, and will call upon the name of the Lord; In the courts of the Lord's house, in the midst of thee, O Jerusalem, Praise ye the Lord.*”

He died on Christmas Eve.  
“Sigh.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said.

“It’s okay,” she said, forcing a smile, “I know he’s in heaven now and one day we’ll see him again. He gave his life to Jesus as a young child.”

“Yes,” I replied, “I believe we will know our loved ones in heaven,” (I was thinking of mom and dad as I said it).

In a later note, Ann said that “God chose him [Adam] for us and we are truly blessed to be his family forever. He lives with Jesus.”

Standing there on the beach that day, in that short window of time where God orchestrated our lives to cross each other—and observing first-hand the emotional toll it had taken on Ann and Ronnie—I became very angry with the enemy of our souls who convinces so many people, especially young men, that they have no longer have any hope in living.

Sadly, Adam is not alone.

In our culture, suicide has reached epidemic proportions. The statistics are staggering: there are an estimated 130 suicides per day in the U.S.; suicide is the 12<sup>th</sup> leading cause of death in our country; in 2020, 45,979 Americans died by suicide (13.48 per 100,000 population); there is an estimated 1.2 million attempted suicides per year (and those are only the ones that are somehow reported); and, the suicide rate is highest among middle-aged men.<sup>2</sup>

In our country, a spirit of death is swallowing up life.  
And Jesus Christ, by His own testimony, is *Life*.

At that point, another person walked up to view Ann and Ronnie’s sandcastle tribute to Adam. I wandered up the beach to my favorite place of prayer. As I looked back down the beach, Ronnie was hauling another tub of ocean water back toward Ann and the sandcastle.

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<sup>2</sup> These figures are from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, based on 2020 data, as cited by American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. Please note these figures are based on pre-pandemic statistics: they may be even higher following the pandemic.

As the waves rolled in, my soul was troubled. My thoughts were about Ann, Ronnie and Adam. *At what point, I asked God, does a healthy honoring and tribute of departed loved ones cross over the line into an idol of grief that the enemy can manipulate?*

My second thought, as I watched Ronnie mix the beach sand with the water in the distance, was about the truly unique God-created specialness of sand.

Yes, sand.<sup>3</sup>

I recalled that my first sermon was about sand. Sand is mentioned some 28 times in the Bible, almost always as a symbol of a number beyond counting. Moses buried the Egyptian man he murdered in sand. Almost every trip up the beach, I ask God how he came up with the idea of sand: porous, heat absorber, cleanser, and source of life.

Today's scientists assert that the sand on the Myrtle Beach strand is predominately quartz, deposited over eons of time from the erosion of the Appalachian Mountains, with bits of shell and a slight browning color due to the rusting effect of iron.<sup>4</sup> Others maintain that "a large part of sand is crushed up spines of sea urchins."<sup>5</sup>

No matter. From the beginning of time, in my view, this sand was created to be building material for Adam's sandcastle.

A therapy of love in the sand.

As I walked back down the beach, I saw Ann and Ronnie one more time working on the sandcastle. I prayed with them again, hand-in-hand, in front of Adam's sandcastle, trusting the Holy Spirit would give me words that would act as a healing balm for their souls ...

*This missive is dedicated to the life of William Adam Wooten (1983-2020), beloved son, father, husband, and brother.*

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<sup>3</sup> One of my favorite verses is Jeremiah 5:22: "Fear ye not me? saith the LORD: will ye not tremble at my presence, which have placed the sand [for] the bound of the sea by a perpetual decree, that it cannot pass it: and cannot pass it: and through the waves thereof toss themselves, yet can they not prevail; though they roar, yet can they not pass over it."

<sup>4</sup> Marissa Polascak, "Myrtle Beach Sand vs. Sand From Around the World," *myrtlebeach.com*, Jan. 1, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Lauren J. Young, "Tracking Time Through Shifting Sands," *Science Friday*, Jul. 29, 2021. Quote is by Stephen Leatherman, Director of the Laboratory for Coastal Research at Florida International University.