

August 30th 2026

Romans 9:12-21

The Dolly Parton Sermon

There is a process in the Catholic church to nominate someone to be recognized as a saint. It takes several years, and requires accounts of their work and miracles here on earth. Or you can ask my sister, who already has a nominee, despite being firmly agnostic.

I will not make the argument that she should be recognized as a saint, but I am going to share some of her life and work, and hopefully show how she was not just a cultural icon, but also a woman of deep faith.

Dolly Parton is not just universally beloved because she was talented as a country singer. She was the shining example of how to come from nothing, grow into something larger than life, and still live out one's faith with humility and kindness. There will be many, many thinkpieces and podcasts about her in coming years. But frankly, when I see this letter to the Romans, I think of Dolly.

Ms. Dolly Parton was born in genuine poverty in the shadows of the Great Smoky Mountains.

Appalachia, the region of the US that sprawls across southern New York and through towards Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi. It holds some of the oldest mountains and forests in North America, and as such are gorgeous, but not great for farming or large industrial development. To gloss over several hundred years of history, it is where the US gets the majority of its coal, and also the region with some of the highest poverty rates and poor healthcare.

This is where Dolly, along with her siblings, grew up, went to church where her grandfather was the Church of God pastor (a pentecostal offshoot), and learned music. She learned the guitar early on, learned how to perform music without learning how to read it, and was signed to her record label at age 19. She slowly developed her own musical style, a soprano voice in country twang that talked about heartbreak, love, and the folks of Appalachia with such kindness it brings tears to the sturdiest coal-miner's eye. She found love, and married Carl Dean in 1966, and instead of being a housewife, became a country superstar.

Dolly had, objectively, a stunning career. She broke chart records left and right, earning by the time of her death over half a billion dollars from her performing alone, acting in beloved movies in the 80's and 90's, and truly emulating her rags to riches story. And yet, what is fascinating to note is how people used her person as a mirror to reflect what they wanted to see.

She was an incredibly talented musician and singer. She was also a bottle blonde bimbo with a huge amount of plastic surgery and a “ditziness” about her. She was a stalwart feminist, and was also a proud Southern woman from Tennessee. She was a joke, and also the comedian. She was everything to everyone and also had only kind things to say about anyone she encountered.

I will not pretend to know what Dolly was thinking, there are a number of interviews that cover her extensively over the decades. I will say that she did a very good job in figuring out how to respond to the ills of the world.

I would argue that one of the biggest reasons Dolly Parton is revered is because she was vocal and active in her work to bring God’s kingdom here and now. She never preached it to the world, though she was open about her faith as a relationship with God. She decided to be clear in what she believed and support others in doing so. She started several scholarship programs to combat the dropout rate in Tennessee. She also started programs to encourage students to go to local colleges and invest in the area. Dolly’s foundation has donated millions to victims of flooding, fires, and hurricanes in the area. She also donated \$1 million to Vanderbilt University’s covid vaccine research, helping to develop the Moderna vaccine. Dollywood, the single largest employer in the area with 4000 workers, now offers 100% tuition coverage for any employee who wants to go to college.

Dolly spoke for LGBTQ rights well before it would have been mainstream to do so, making her stance clear in 1984 in an interview with Andy Warhol, that she “I got a huge gay following and some really macho-looking women,” Parton said in the cover story.

"To me, people are people. ... Many of my friends are gay, male and female. I don't judge people. I don't care what people do in their bedrooms and people shouldn't care what I do in mine.", and later in her career famously quipped "If I hadn't been a girl, I'd have been a drag queen" when asked about Tennessee's anti-trans laws.

Where many used their faith as a cudgel against the queer community, Dolly saw it was a source of strength for her to love everyone. After all, we are all God’s children, and we are all called to live peaceably with, and love, one another.

But her biggest contribution, in my measurement, is her Imagination Library[Library picture]

In 1995 Dolly launched an innovative program. She told reporters that she knew her dad was smart, but he also was illiterate, and that hindered his job prospects. So, the Imagination Library was formed. From birth until age 5, children from around the world can receive a book a month in the mail. Over 300 million books have been sent to children over the past 30 years. We have seen the research over and over again that reading physical copies of books, not just digital media, is essential for kids to grow their reading skills, which turn into better education and career opportunities for everyone. The program you see here is from Edmonton, where First Nations, Metis, and Inuit children are prioritized by the Dolly Parton Foundation.

There are dozens more examples across gender, sexuality, race, economic, and environmental rights that I could share, if I had two hours. But I hope these demonstrate just a few of the ways Dolly has been able to make a clear difference in the world.

And one does not need to look far into our scripture to see where she took her guidance from.

Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

We have had story after story of rich people who get richer by exploiting everyone around them, and then using their wealth to hurt others to fill a void in their hearts. Because when you try to fill that void with all the things that corrupt, it can never be satiated. But Dolly Parton is the example of when we live with love above hate, a commitment to peace above greed, and a willingness to work with humility as opposed to ego. Good job, faithful and beloved servant. May we carry on your legacy in God's kingdom. Amen.