

**A Witness to the Christian Gospel
at the Death of Barbara Shelley
Luke 5:17-26**

In just five days it will be a year since we gathered for Ed's funeral. Dealing with cruelty and tragedy of Ed's death has been hard for the entire family and for all the friends who love them. We've watched Cele deal courageously with cancer and come out on the other side with new life and curly hair, and for that we're grateful! Who thought chemo could be a beauty treatment! There's been the wedding of a granddaughter in Charleston and the sale of a home that's made Greg not only a homebuilder but a trailer-dweller for a season. But the thing that's most surprised us all is how well Barbara's done till just two days ago when her life abruptly ended. Thanks to Byron's daily check-ins she was found within a few hours. I was teaching a Bible study on James when Lee came in and handed me a note, *Barbara Shelly just died*. Sometimes it's just information, but here I felt a twinge at the loss of another person who knew my grandmother, one less link with my Horry Country roots which go back to the eighteenth century.

A year ago I heard all sorts of people saying *Barbara won't last long*, but she did, and within the limits of her frailty lived well and full and *independently*, which may have been the thing she most valued. *Don't mess with me, I'm OK* was her number one slogan, even with her boys Byron and Greg who stopped by often just to check on mom. She didn't want some home care worker just sitting there staring at her all day! It would have driven them both nuts. For Greg each visit meant his mother asking if he wanted some ice cream, to which the reply was *Yes, I think I will*.

Hers was a giving nature and she put others first, even to a fault. But that was Barbara, who even when she was sick did not miss her ministry of Meals on Wheels. But that service was not something new but the extension of a Sunday habit in which she made a plate for an older family, took it to Ninety-Six, and did not fix her own plate till she returned from her duty of love. Who does that today? Who has that kind of commitment? She was made of grit and gristle, of love and toughness, of laughter and humor, of faith and faithfulness that went deep. Twenty-eight years investing in other people's children as a school teacher. Then with Ed launching Teen Town which for decades was a landmark in Greenwood and put them in touch with most of the town's teenagers. Remember how important it once was to have a cool pair of

jeans, and before the mall came to town where could you get them but Teen Town! I have no idea how many washers and dryers this family burned through getting the sizing out of stiff Levi's before they were sold, or how many hours Barbara spend in alterations at home over an ironing board. The woman was a dynamo of service. I'm told the Levi dealer in Columbia once said to Ed, "I'm going to make you lots of money," the details of which remain a deeply guarded family secret. A beach house and some great and goofy family vacations are a tribute to smarts, hard work, and its benefits.

Our parents are such towering figures in our lives, so god-like in their influence, that a more accurate picture is often obtained from a son or daughter in law, which is why yesterday- as I sat with Byron and Tyler, Greg and Cele- I turned and asked *curly*, "What was Barbara like as a mother in law?" Then there unfolded the most amazing story of love between the generations. I think Barbara knew early on that this high-school honey might turn permanent and so gave Cele a job at Teen Town just to keep her under close watch. A young marriage found Cele showing promise as a teaching assistant, but with no money for college. With the encouragement of Mr. Buist she considered a career as a teacher, and then came the moment Barbara said, "I will pay for your college." Talk about a deep and long investment. The little girl that used to show up on the doorstep with her dad to collect for the newspaper became an employee, a daughter-in-law, and eventually a colleague because of Barbara's wise investments. Every Thanksgiving now when Cele makes the dressing according to Barbara's detailed pattern, she'll remember a second mother who shaped her life in ways that were good for all. Easter Sunday, just two weeks ago, was the last big meal, and I wonder if Barbara anticipated this might be the final one because here she broke a recent tradition of serving from the stove top and returned to the old tradition of big bowls and platter on a well-set table. Who knows? But maybe she did. You who were there will remember the meal as a last Sunday lunch, and it will serve as a permanent symbol of a hospitality and welcome that enfolded you all. Mother's Day will be a challenge this year, bitter-sweet and full of precious memories.

In the months to come each of Barbara's children- Byron and Greg and Laura- will have to come to terms not just with her death but with what I've come to call *the death of the second parent*. There's no reference point now above them except in memory and example. Today everyone moves up a level. You are now the terminal generation. And when the center of family life, meaning mom and dad, are gone,

some decisions have to be made. All the legal stuff, the estate and such, but beyond that the question, *How are we now to be a family? Who will be the glue? Who will continue the traditions now that the keeper of the traditions is gone?* Momma no longer gets a vote, only those who remain. Don't fritter away the deposits of love your mother made in you all.

I won't review for you the many connections I have with this family which go back to the Best and Lewis farms at Galivant's Ferry and to a little Methodist Church now closed- *Sandy Plain*- where our relatives lie side to side in the cemetery. When I called my cousin Luke Nance on Wednesday and told his wife Lauralee that Barbara had died she immediately quipped, "She was one of the Best." and then rehearsed their many contacts. Barbara knew my aunts who lived to be 101 and 102 and shared with me several stories I'd not heard before. There was pride in that community that Barbara made the Aynor High school sports hall of fame and went off to Columbia College. Ed was baptized in a church where my great uncle gave the land. And now, when from time to time I turn at the big white Holiday house for a visit to my ancestors at Sandy Plain I will recall that this is the place where Barbara's early faith in Christ was nurtured and appreciate once again that it's what we believe most deeply that shapes our life most truly. So if Barbara has touched your life in some good way, then you too may want to take a pilgrimage down to the Ferry and stand before that church which was across from her house and say to yourself and God, "This is where it started. This where she learned it." We need to make such pilgrimages because our hearts ache for deep connections and it's one of the ways we continue to fulfill the command to honor father and mother that our days may be long and full of the wisdom of faith and love.

There was a crazy and humorous side to Barbara that her family loved. Here was a woman who when her school principal walked into a faculty meeting would announce before all, "Someone get the bread and mustard, the bologna just walked in!" And because it was her, and because one of her roles was to be the resident court-jester, everyone laughed and no one was offended. She loved it when Tyler's train would come by and he'd blow the whistle to his beloved MiMi. He also remembers during a beach trip her sneaking him into a movie or two for which he did not make the age requirement for admission. This may explain some of Tyler's challenges, and for that oversight and premature education he gladly forgives his grandmother.

The Gospel text I've just read is chosen for several reasons. First that it

demonstrates how Jesus put a priority on healing our relationship with God. The crippled man's most visible problem was his gnarled and shrunken legs, and Jesus eventually dealt with that, but the first thing he did when the man came down through a roof layered with dust and debris was to make a remarkable announcement in front of all who filled the house, "Man, your sins are forgiven for you (by God!)." Jesus looked him in the eye and addressed his deepest need first, and that is to know that all we inherited and all we've added to the burden of our alienation from God can be removed if we trust the gift that comes to us in Jesus. He didn't ask the man to list his sins and be publicly embarrassed. Instead, he announced a great gift, "Your heavenly Father wants a new relationship with you, and as of now the slate is wiped clean." At that moment many in the room thought, "If for him, then for me as well." Others groused, "Who does he think he is? How can he claim to know the mind of God?"

No telling how many times across her days, beginning at Sandy Plain, that Barbara heard the diagnosis we all share and the cure Jesus offers. In Bible stories, in sermons from my forebears, in family prayers at a table, and supremely at the Lord's table, that Jesus offers us a healed relationship with the God from whom we've all wandered. It was one of the deepest roots of her life, which was why on Sundays she was here. I've watched her come forward and humbly receive the sacrament, "The body and blood of Christ given for you." She was as full of flaws and failings as us all, and those who were closest saw them most clearly, but isn't that true of us all and so not as source of judgment? Never question her trust in Christ or that she is now safe with him and made whole in ways that go beyond imagination. The Jesus who forgives is also the Jesus who heals because salvation is about God making us whole, and that includes our broken bodies, for this man crippled limbs, for Barbara a body grown thin and frail and dying. She is now filled with the love of Christ, and one day all believers shall receive new resurrection bodies like Jesus. God will reclaim and heal the whole creation, and us along with it!

Let me tell you why we did not sing *Amazing Grace* today. Barbara forbade it, and since she now has a new place of influence from the balcony I dared not violate her wish lest she entreat the Lord to visit me with something unpleasant. It wasn't that the hymn's not true or beloved, just a bit threadbare and overused. To be safe we've used the hymns she approved for Ed's funeral. Better safe than sorry!

Three things I know about everyone here, including myself. You've thought and done things you don't want anyone to know about, and there are pains and

struggles in your life too deep for words. We all share in the alienation of sin which disrupts all our relationships. We all have the same disease. Secondly that we're all going to die, just like Barbara, and every funeral we attend and cemetery we drive by is a reminder of such. Barbara fell dead early Wednesday morning as if someone unplugged her. A blink, and she was gone, and so it shall be for us. We have a deadly disease, all of us. The third is this: the question is not, Are we forgivable? because the answer's Yes. The question is do we have the humility to receive the gift and the deep changes it enables and demands. "Your sins are forgiven for you." Barbara said Yes to that gift long ago, and it explains much of her life.

What would it mean for your relationship with the One who made you to be healed and restored, then to face your living and your dying not on your own but hand in hand with God. I do not see what Barbara now sees; it's just beyond sight. But from time to time I catch glimpses, and it makes me grateful for a church that continues to speak with reverence and joy of the Savior who came for heaven for the likes of me and you. Don't dismiss this faith; at least give it a close examination to see if it's true. What a pity to live your life without resources from above and the hope that makes every day a great adventure.

Pastor Phil Thrailkill
Main Street UMC
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