

A Witness to the Christian Gospel at the Death of Ben Herlong
John 14:1-7, 11:17-27
November 1, 2013
Pastor Phil Thrailkill

It was two weeks ago that my cousin called and left a message, “Phil, this is Norma Able in Saluda. Thought you ought to know that Ben Herlong had a severe heart attack and is in the Aiken hospital. He and your father were great friends.” Thankful for her kindness, I called back for a few details. It was then I knew I had to make a visit to Aiken. I wanted to go, and I think the Lord wanted me to go.

It was an hour drive from Greenwood, and when I walked in Ben’s room on Friday afternoon there sat Caroline and Rene who welcomed me with a surprised look and a big smile. I think I said something like, “My dad couldn’t come, so he sent me,” and we hugged each other. I turned to Ben stretched out in a chair and quipped, “Glad to see you’re still with us. What happened?”

I then heard the story of the heart attack and his plan to return to the Saluda Nursing Home for rehab. Ben recounted an earlier stint in the same nursing home for complications with his swollen legs which were severely injured in Germany only ten days before the war’s end by a freak explosion, not of a Nazi but of a U.S. mine. My guess is that the infelicitous phrase *friendly fire* had special meaning to Ben. When he pulled down his socks, I saw the gouging scars on his ankle and calf for which years of post-war hospitalization and many operations were required. I wondered in that moment what prayers he must have prayed, and how all his high school buddies must have prayed when they received letters of Ben’s injuries. “O God, please save his legs and let him walk again.” Scattered from east to west, from the European to the Pacific theaters, they remembered innocent days, longed for home and girlfriends left behind and did their duty. Only a few days before he died my father reminisced about the three close friends who graduated Saluda High School with him who died in combat. There in his dying bed he cried as if he’d only just received the news. The wounds of war never go away in this life, but in the life to come we are told all tears are wiped away.

These boys had grown up together during the Depression, won a state football championship together, gone off to college together, gone off to war together, returned home a few friends short, and stayed in touch all their lives because there was a deep bond of history and brotherly affection between them. And that is why I’m here today, because of a lifelong friendship of Saluda-boys-become-world-class-men that stretched across more than eighty years and left a mark on my life. And if you poke around in old

closets or trunks, you may find- as I once did- a purple satin letter jacket from the 1941 Tigers. A picture of that team is one of my family's prized possessions, and whenever we went through that album my father would name each member, tell me a story or two about each one including which branch of the service they were in, where they were now, and over the years when each one died. He said, "We walked with a bit of a swagger after that win, and it felt good to be admired by one and all."

There at Ben's bedside I also heard some new stories about my father and grandfather which were a delight to me. Especially the one about all the Herlong and Thraikill boys and who-knows-how-many-others hanging on the outside of a 1928 Chevrolet on the way to a sand lot baseball game my grandfather Carl arranged and for which he supplied much of the equipment, including these two baseball bats. Can't you see Ben taking a swipe at a pitch as his brother Jimmy razed him? Knowing Carl's later difficulties up close, Ben encouraged me with the words, "He was a good man, Phil, and good to us boys before the drink got him."

You see, the Herlong mob and the Thraikill Boys, Toots and James, grew up at the same end of South Jefferson. And for my father there was an inner circle of six I heard of all my life: Jimmy and Ben Herlong, H.Z. Duffie, Fred Rothell, Pat Patterson, and his *own brother Bill*. Trips from Cheraw to Saluda to see grandmother Lida always included a route by the Herlongs and the Duffies for a visit, maybe even a meal, and when grandmother's house was full we found ourselves sleeping at one of their houses.

It was so much fun to hear the adults talk and laugh, and when we were *shooshed* outside, I found a way to come back within earshot. In what I overheard something within me was being formed. Stories about Clemson, stories about work, about the war and their boyhood, about how they met their wives, and whenever I watched *The Little Rascals* on television I imagined them as the characters, since in those days they also wore corduroy knickers and long socks. Saluda boys called them *whistle britches* because when you walked the corduroy ridges rubbed together on your legs to make a sound. It took about six weeks to break in a new pair and for the whistling to stop.

As a rural mail carrier Ben had one of the town's most coveted jobs. Government pay, start early and off by two in the afternoon, time for a life and another job. Rosemary told me on the phone this week that her dad always had a project and how for seven months he drove to Ninety-Six to build her first home. Only a week ago he was letting a contract for work on his carport. Each of his four daughters has stories like that, of a dad who never quit contributing to his large flock of females. It may be why he had to sneak off from time to time for some male company. Swimming in an

estrogen ocean is taxing on a man who often thought to himself, “There are not enough bathrooms in this house.”

What many may not know and others have forgotten is how much boys need fathers and heroes, and to a wide-eyed ten year old these Saluda men were larger than life in my imagination. Many of you know them better than I did, and those who lived with them as wives and children know their private flaws and failings and must forgive any of the ways he wounded you. But for me, because of my dad’s deep love for each, they were larger than life, and I imagined they beat the Japs and defeated the Nazis and saved Western civilization almost single-handedly with a bit of help from the Brits. Romantic stories of Travis and Bonham and the Alamo fueled the sense that Saluda was a town that generated only brave men. Here I was in the presence of real men, good men, strong men, men my father loved, men of faith who fought for what was right, then came home to build families, deliver the mail, guarantee clean water and make house calls as a country physician. Young men need such dreams if they are not to become trivial and no-count. A hand on the back and a tousle of the hair mean a lot from your dad’s old buddies, and when they ask how you’re doing, you want to give a good report.

I remember a Sunday here at St. Paul’s standing between my grandmother and father and singing to Johnny Goff’s waving hands, then looking around to see the faces of Ben and Caroline and Jimmy and Bela and H.Z. and Mary Helen and their children singing with us in a grand chorus of praise to God. If that sounds a bit dramatic and sentimental, it is, because and it is in such mystical moments we sense in our bones the meaning of the phrase *the communion of the saints*. It’s good to be part of something grander and larger than your small little self and to be surrounded by steadfast friends who week by week and across the seasons of life keep showing up on Sundays because it’s their duty and their privilege and their delight and their habit of character to stay in the faith by being as faithful as they are able, and who over time discover again and again that their lives are encircled by the love of the Father and the presence of Jesus and the illumination of the Holy Spirit. They made it home, and they were grateful, not ashamed to love their country and their wives and their church and the things that make life good and even noble, and with their passing such virtues are in short supply. The accumulation of moral capital is running thin, and we all feel the lack.

At nearly eighty-nine Ben took a last sip of coffee and took his last breath as his heart beat for the last time. He was glad to come back to the U.S. after the war to a grand homecoming, but that is nothing to compare to the homecoming he received the day his mission ended. A believer, a baptized member of Christ’s holy church, a soldier of the cross, a forgiven man, a man made better over time by God’s grace and all the

people and circumstances God sent across his path, a man who knows what we are doing today and who cheers for us from the stands as we run our leg of the race and head towards the finish line. Ben's now sees the Savior we know by faith; he views his life and ours through the merciful and true eyes of Jesus. What joy must be his! And though I did not say it when I was at his bedside with a tearful parting prayer, I wanted to say, "Ben, please tell my dad hello." As I walked out of the hospital I thought, "This is the last time I will see him alive." It's good to sing *What a friend we have in Jesus* but also good to sing the praises of our earthly, faithful friends who keep us knit together across the years. Without knowing it, my father's friends stamped me deeply, and I am forever in their debt, and with that hospital visit I made a next-to-last payment to Ben, these words being a last payment.

Several times across my nearly thirty-seven years of ordination I've come back to St. Paul's and taken a seat in my grandmother's pew where she sang off key and a half measure behind the rhythm because of her deafness. When asked why she came to church when she couldn't hear, she replied, "I just want the devil to know who's side I'm on!" or so the legend goes. I've even searched through the church records to find the dates of my father's baptism. It was here he went to Sunday School with his buddies, here he was baptized and made a confession of faith, here he received the sacrament, here he returned after the war to see familiar faces and give a bear hug to his buddies who made it home safely. Wouldn't you love to have a video of those encounters and the stories they told one another?

In Betty and Jim's wedding album in the third drawer of a chest in the living room is a picture of their wedding party at the base of grand staircase at a home in Florence, SC, and in that photo are all the names I've recited. It's June of 1952 and they've all gathered in spiffy white dinner jackets to launch their Doctor buddy James into his marriage to Nurse Betty with the auburn hair. What a handsome bunch of guys. And if you look closely, one of Ben's shoulders is a little lower because of his favoring one leg. I recently reviewed the picture and said to my mother, "Were men just better looking in those days? All these guys look like movie stars." She shot back, "No, son, but you must understand, these men were all from Saluda!" We both laughed, and she added, "Don't you think Ben with his wavy hair looks a bit like Van Johnson?"

Ben's life was shaped by this place and by God's grace over a lifetime. He was a follower of the One worth following. I hope you are, and from where Ben now resides, so does he! It really matters. Whom you follow and where you spend Sunday mornings determines what you become, in this and in the world to come. Savor Ben's life and all its associations. Jesus Christ makes men good. Let him do the same for you.
