

**A Witness to the Christian Gospel
at the Death of Beth Gray
Mark 5:24b-34
Pastor Phil Thrailkill, Main Street UMC
August 2, 2013**

There are, I have come to see, *marker days*, days that divide our lives into *before* and *after*, and this is surely one of those days. The daughters Lindsay and Hannah and Micah and the grandchildren Wells and Mia have never known life without Beth, but now this is the new reality for the rest of their days: life after momma, life after BeBe. Grief is now your long-term companion, and with the grace of God and the love of family and friends you will make your way forward with a wound in your heart. It is raw and open now, but eventually it will close and a scar will form, one always sensitive to the touch, which is why decades from now there will be piercing moments as fresh as today. You will weep and wonder and ponder and deal with regrets for things said and unsaid, but you can be assured of this, that because Beth has entered fully into the forgiveness that was promised in her baptism, she fully forgives us all and frees us from owing her anything. Her untimely death was not a punishment; it was a testimony to the toll that life and disease took upon her at every level, physically and mentally.

For reasons yet to be fully understood, Beth died early Tuesday morning, and while I think it bad theology to say that *God took her*, we can say with confidence that *God received her when she died* because she was a follower of Jesus Christ. Her faith and trust, in the midst of great suffering, were rightly placed in our merciful Savior, and that is our hope, for her and for ourselves. I don't think Beth wanted to leave us. She had only just days before taken the risk of neck surgery to relieve some of the pain that weighed her down with discouragement. Appointments were scheduled for followup visits. Those who spoke to her as late as Monday neither saw nor heard any signs of impending death, but it was her last day with us.

From now on Beth will be known by the stories that are told and the memories and anniversaries that are marked and kept. The things she loved and touched, the special foods she cooked, and her way of doing things with an artistic flair will not be forgotten by those who loved her. But her living presence is with us no more. There will be times when you sense her presence and turn to hear her voice. You may have an extraordinarily vivid dream. These are reminders that she is not far away; she has been joined, as the Creed says, to the communion of the saints, and you will never be closer

to her or the Jesus she now sees face to face than when you come to worship, and especially on Sundays when we take communion together.

There were two times this year when I had an especially meaningful engagement with Beth, the first being the Sundays around Easter. She was strong enough to come back to church, and for several weeks in a row she came up to me after the service to receive prayer. "I'm feeling a little better," she said, "and it feels so good to come back to church, but I've got a long way to go, Pastor Phil, with my family and with my health, so would you pray for my healing and for wisdom." She didn't care who saw her and pride was no longer a problem. I had the sense that I was dealing with something fragile when I prayed for her, and I was.

The second was about two months ago, early in June, when she called and asked that I come by for a conversation. "I've got to see you," she said. So, rather than take my car, I walked the short distance to her home, and there we spent about an hour and half together in the den, me listening and her pouring out the uncensored story of her life and family, including the long bout with Lyme's disease. Her special concerns were Bill and the daughters, the pressures of an upcoming wedding, and how to deal with the pain in her body and her increasingly brittle emotional status. This is one of the high privileges of being a pastor, when people have watched you operate for a while and take the risk of trust. At the end we made some plans together that involved both physicians and community resources and prayed together. I left exhausted, wondering what to do with it all. My responses would be simple. I would pray for Beth and her family, and I would call her every seven to ten days to see if there was any progress on our plan, and those were disciplines I kept. When I'd call, she'd say, "You checking on me again?" "Yes," I'd reply with a chuckle, "it was our agreement." I had no idea our work together would be cut short by death, but that is the value of making and keeping promises, isn't it? That when surprises come, there are no regrets. It was a privilege to pray with Beth, and it was a privilege to be her confidant and pastor. It was a means of grace for us both.

When I sat down with most of the family yesterday for a time of planning and storytelling, it happened again, as I have come to expect. Initial awkwardness, the comfort of a prayer, and then a flood of memories. Each had a story about Beth beginning with Bill who announced that when they started dating he was a mature twenty-one and she a naive sixteen. Everyone giggled, including Bill. Bill then told a story of how he and Beth once rode galloping horses along the beach in Galveston.

Never had they felt more alive to one another and the good creation. Hanging out at *Starnes*, a local watering hole- what we used to call *a joint*- was another topic altogether! I found out from Beth's brother Bill that she so resembled him that when the nightly news reports came on from Vietnam, Beth's mother was fearful to have her in the room lest Bill's death be one of those reported.

It was with tears of gratitude that Hannah spoke of a magical spring day in April when she and Beth headed off to Greenville for *a girl's day out* and ended up buying a wedding dress. Beth felt good, and it was a day without drama. A more recent day together was July 15 on some doctor's visits. A simple lunch, time to talk, a day not to be forgotten, made all the more poignant and cherished by Beth's death. Micah was grateful that she came home several weeks ago for a new beginning and had time with Beth. She told of losing her mother's favorite necklace in a car wreck and returning several week's later to find it hidden there on the road side. Never has Micah been more grateful to God and the holy angels for guarding that treasure for representation to Beth.

Then there was her sister Caroline who regaled us with a retelling of the legendary McCall/Gray all-girl and month-long family vacation to New Mexico with no other reason than to drive brother Rod bonkers! I recommend that Rod call some of his movie buddies at National Lampoon and arrange for a new vacation comedy, and make sure they get the story about the port-a-pottee inside the van! The highlight of the trip for Beth was the tour of Georgia O'Keefe's home and art, including the famous door in many of her paintings.

The room we sat in was upstairs. I later learned from Kathy Kelly that this was the space where Beth faithfully attended several Disciple Bible Study courses to strengthen her faith through study and community. She even dragged Brother Bill to one of the studies! At the end of our time together we all agreed that telling Beth stories, both the joyful and the painful, was one of the healings God would give us should we keep up the practice at birthdays and anniversaries and whenever two or more were together and one risked saying, "Remember when...."

All of us will die, but not all will have the debilitating experience of a long, chronic disease like Beth. A tick bite led to Lyme's disease which was not officially diagnosed for about a decade. A little critter, a spirochete, burrowing into the center of a nerve cell, there to set up residence and do its damage. Beth lived with long misery,

enough to end a teaching career, and with it the shame and anger of often being told there was nothing much wrong with her, the implication being that it was as much psychiatric as anything. Wouldn't that wear anyone down? Insurance companies who balked at paying claims. Wouldn't that tempt anyone to look for relief, however temporary, wherever it could be found? Then a doctor was found near Charlotte, a specialist, who confirmed the Lyme's and told Beth she had the highest spirochete count he'd seen. It was something of a relief to be vindicated, even if the disease could not be cured at this point. She wasn't lying; she wasn't malingering; she was sick. Her disability was finally on brain damage from Lyme's disease.

What was said of the woman with the hemorrhage in Mark's gospel could be said of Beth, that she had "suffered much under many physicians, and had spent all she had, and was no better but rather grew worse." I'm not sure faith is faith until it contains a dose of desperation, and that was surely true of the unnamed woman who formed a plan to get near enough to Jesus to touch the hem of his garment, which she did. And when she did, she was healed and then called to give a trembling testimony face down before Jesus and the crowds. If there is a tragedy about Beth, it's that- at least in this life- she was not physically and emotionally healed as we all wanted. She was sustained, but she was not cured. Not all get the miracle they desire, but I assure you that at her last breath Beth's hand was found touching the hem of his garment in a desperate act of faith that did not go unrewarded. "Daughter," Jesus said to Beth as she saw him, "your faith has made you well...; be healed of your disease."

There is enormous pain in this immediate and extended family, and dealing with Beth's death will either make us better or drive us deeper into the various hiding places of anger and isolation and addictions as our chosen comfort. But I assure us all that this is not God's will or what Beth desires now that she shares in the mercy and knowledge of Jesus Christ. There is help abundant, if only we will humble ourselves, tell the truth, and receive the aid God offers through pastors and doctors and counselors and Christians friends. Much of the good Beth wished for those she loved most remains unfinished. The healing and freedom she now enjoys can in part be ours beginning today, but only if we turn to the Lord who welcomed her at death. Beth is fine, but we are not. There is much work left to be done. What shall we do, and how shall our grief and loss lead us to new life? One thing is sure, there is no lack of resources or help for the willing. Do not harden your hearts but open them to the healing wisdom of our merciful Lord. Amen.
