

A Witness to the Christian Gospel at the Death of Bill Gardner
Luke 9:18-27, Pastor Phil Thrailkill, October 16, 2013

Twice in the last ten days I've been startled and surprised by events at the death beds of the elderly. There you stand with the family. Breathing is irregular; the patient is unresponsive. One of the children says, "The doctor says they may not last the night." The finish line is near, and so it's time for a different kind of prayer, what Catholics call *Last Rites*, what our *United Methodist Book of Worship* terms *Ministry With The Dying*. And so I laid my hand on fevered brows and offered this prayer, "Lord, Jesus, deliver your child from all evil and set them free from every bond; that they may rest with your saints in the joy of your eternal home, for ever and ever. Amen." It's a solemn moment, and in both cases I fully expected to hear they'd died during the night. Imagine my surprise to be told the next morning that each was sitting up eating breakfast in an unexpected rally. I had personally licked the stamp and stuck it on their foreheads for posting to the world to come, and here it came back *returned to sender*. I chuckled, "Well, Lord, your ways are surprising." One of the two was Mr. Bill Gardner who died several days later in the full assurance of faith, surrounded by the love of his daughters Kit and Suzie and wrapped in the prayers of his pastor Valerie. It's a good thing to be embarrassed by God; it's a reminder that when we humble ourselves and pray, God may act contrary to all our predictions.

Bill and I had several connections through the larger Gardner family with its roots in Hartsville where I served before coming to Greenwood. But it was only last week a deeper connection was made when I discovered that Suzie's roommate of four years at Columbia College, Jan Eutsler, was one of my dad's patients and the daughter of his best friend; also I might add - the prettiest cheerleader ever to come out of Cheraw High whom I greatly admired from a distance of four years. But our deepest connection was one many of you also share with Bill, and that is an abiding faith in Jesus Christ and a place in his church. To the question, "But who do *you* say that I am?" Bill answered with Simon Peter, "The Messiah of God," then spent the rest of life living into the deep meaning of the words that follow, "For whoever will save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it."

Sunday afternoon I saw pictures of Bill as a dashing young officer, was given a tour of his combat medals and heard the story of his wounding shortly after D-Day and the years spent in hospitals for postwar recovery. What would it mean to lie wounded under a tree and have an artillery shell burst in the tree overhead? Then to keep your infected legs through the use of a then-new antibiotic penicillin. What prayers did Bill pray when he thought he was going to die or else spend the rest of life on artificial limbs? The God who marked him *returned to sender* extended his life to age ninety-six in a humorous play on words, sustained a lifelong love with Kitty, and gave him two daughters who continue his legacy of service in work with the poor and a wonderful cross-racial adoption. I suspect Suzie and Willow Kate have a private joke between them, "Did you see the look on their faces when I told them you were my mother?" Bill was a mayor, a man of business who sometimes did not collect from the poor till winter was past, a fast friend to a powerful neighbor of another political party, a man with a smile and a handshake who was eager for prayers to the very end. How do you explain the length and the virtue of his life? Only one way in my book, rather in the church's book. Bill was shaped by the grace of God across a lifetime. He was a follower of the One worth following. I hope you are, and from where Bill now resides, so does he! It really does matter. Whom you follow and where you spend Sunday mornings determines what you become, in this and in the world to come. Ponder this life; it is a sign.
