

**A Witness to the Christian Gospel at the Death of Dr. Bill Klauber**  
**Saturday, March 8, 2014**  
**Pastor Phil Thraikill, Main Street UMC**  
**Mark 2:13-17, 3:1-6**

**I**t was Monday afternoon just before 2:00 pm that Emmie, our church secretary, knocked on the door and notified me Dr. Klauber was nearing death. I'd seen him the week before and knew it would not be long. I went to the bedside at NHC and there found Bill Jr. and his fiancé Kay plus several Hospice workers. I'd visited Dr. Klauber numerous times at Wesley Commons when he was still a bit alert. He was pleased to find out my father graduated from MUSC as he had, and when I mentioned that Dr. Stanley Baker was one of dad's classmates he brightened up considerably because of their long cooperation in radiology and surgery, Dr. Klauber *looking inside* through radiology, Dr. Baker *going inside* with a scalpel. I continued to visit him after the move to NHC, but he was largely unresponsive, but did squeeze my hand several times after a prayer.

It's time for a new respect for those who work in such facilities. So easy to criticize, so hard to understand what it means to offer practical body care with consistent kindness and personal regard. It's now a spiritual discipline for me to stop at the desk on the way out and say at least one *thank you* for what they do for the folk who once sat in the pews of this church. After some small talk and the exit of the Hospice staff we circled three chairs near the bed and did the Methodist version of last rites.

"Dr. Klauber," I said, "this is Pastor Phil of Main Street Church. You're here at NHC. You may not be with us much longer. I'm going to read Psalm 130 on your behalf, and if you can hear me, make it your prayer. I want you to know that you belong to Jesus Christ, you belong to us, and you are not alone. You are forgiven. With my hand on his brow I offered this prayer from our *Book of Worship*, "Lord Jesus Christ, deliver your son Bill from all evil and set him free from every bond; that he may rest with your saints in the joy of your eternal home, for ever and ever. Amen."

I then signed him with the cross as a reminder of his baptism years ago, and then all that remained was the waiting and the attending and the remembering. I received a call from Bill Jr. about three hours later that his father had died peacefully.

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Because of all the deaths I've attended in nearly thirty-eight years as a pastor, I tell you there is always a holy mystery here. They are with us, and then they are gone, and no amount of medical description accounts for the sense of personal presence followed by personal absence. There is a body and there is a soul or personality, the software that animates the hardware; we are binary creatures, dust of the earth into which God blows the breath of life to animate the whole. Then- at death- they are separated for the first time after which we commit the body to the ground and the person to God as we await the end of history and the great resurrection of the dead when persons shall again be made whole as the software of the self is joined to a new piece of indestructible hardware, a body like that of the risen Jesus and so we finally enter the new heavens and new earth of God's kingdom. Heaven is a wonderful stopover, as we've heard today in two gospel solos about golden slippers and ringing bells, but it is not the goal.

The Christian reading of post-mortem existence has two parts: *life after death* and then *life after life after death*, a wonderful phrase I borrow from Bishop N.T. Wright. Dr. Bill has now experienced the first part- which is heaven, but no one of us has yet experienced the second part, only Jesus beginning on the first Easter morning as our Savior and Pioneer. It's why The Nicene Creeds ends with such great expectancy, "We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come." Perhaps it's why at death even the most sophisticated say simple things like, "They've passed on," because we know down deep that the human journey does not end with death. His was a long life of service, as his obituary testifies, and it was a good death after ninety-six years. To be cared for, prayed for, and to take your last breath in the presence of one of your five beloved boys is not a bad end. We arrive helpless and we leave helpless; we pass from the womb into this life and through the narrow gate of death into the wonderful surprises of God. And in between we have a daily chance to respond to God's grace in Jesus Christ and to be shaped by the opportunities and battles of this life. It is your life, and what are you doing with it?

I have noticed in our culture an increasing impatience with the aged, the infirm, and particularly with the dying, especially when preceded by a long period of dementia or seeming uselessness. Just lying there taking up resources, *no quality* they say, and I hope we never follow the example of certain European countries who allow physicians to *do them in* with active euthanasia, because that will be a sign to us all that we have lost a sense of the dignity of the human person grounded in the image of God. As long as they are with us they are image bearers, and if we start with

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them, where will we stop? There is legislation pending in the Netherlands to give disabled children such a choice, and when the ones who counsel them are able-bodied and sophisticated, the comparison is just too loaded. Life is not efficient, and the calculus of pragmatism is often wrong. Made in God's image, one for whom Christ came and died and rose; worthy and dignity are not something earned but given. Never forget or dismiss the inherent dignity of every human being, and if the culture shifts- as it may under the pressure of finances and a loss of common faith, make sure you are at a Roman Catholic hospital near the end! With a crucifix on every wall, you may be a bit safer.

As I spoke with John and Beth earlier in the week, Dr. Klauber's motto was this: *Life is a daring adventure, or it is nothing*. Pilot, scuba diver, white-water rafter, pioneer in radiology and in the training of radiologic technicians, black and white in the day when those distinctions still held and there was much prejudice to be overcome. Think of the young women and men who could say with pride, "I was trained by Dr. Klauber," and for whom it was a ticket to a better job and a better life and the privilege of hands-on care with the sick and fearful. Twenty years on the Piedmont Tech board, founding fellow of the Genetics Center, Building Committee of Wesley Commons, a philanthropist through his own generosity.

I invite you, as I did early this morning, to Google the USS Dahlgren, a World War I era destroyer on which Dr. Klauber served in the North Atlantic as a Navy lieutenant in World War II. Storms, bitter cold, ice on the rails, high seas, convoy escort duty, wondering if some officer named Wolfgang in a Wolf Pack of subs had you in his periscope, and every man's health your personal responsibility. Time to man-up as part of a great cause with other seaman to win a war. Something worth dying for. Only God know the prayers Dr. Bill prayed on that tin can of ship and how grateful he was to return home to begin his dual training in Internal Medicine and the new science of Radiology, looking inside the human body to see what's wrong. Retaining and perfecting you knowledge of anatomy, a copy of Gray's on your desk next to the growing pile of unread journals .

He spend hours staring at thousands of x-rays on lighted screens and writing endless reports by hand and later into dictaphones. And when it was a child or a friend, knowing it was not just another case but one that called for a personal touch. Understanding the physics of it all and the chemistry of the potions you made people swallow. Looking for dystonic reactions and spotting the shadows of tumors in the

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lungs or nearly invisible cracks in a pelvis so colleagues would have maps for where to cut and what medicines to inject. The teamwork on a naval vessel is not unlike the teamwork in a hospital with its varieties of departments and specialists, and maybe that's why Dr. Klauber gave time and money to institutions that built capacity in the community, Piedmont Tech to train the young, Wesley Commons to care for the old, the Genetics Center to unlock the secrets of the deep code of life and bend them towards therapeutic ends. I remember asking my father as a boy what M.D. meant, and he said, "It means *Medical Doctor*," and then added with a smile, "But some say it means *Minor Deity*," and when I responded, "I don't understand," he said, "One day you will." And isn't that why, though sometimes tarnished, the word *Physician* still carries an aura of high respect? They and all their helpers are God's friends, and they are deeply engaged in the holy work of healing. Our world is currently broken and under the curse of death, so we need doctors, but one day....

You may wonder why I chose Psalm 139 as our Old Testament text? First because it's such a pro-life text that treats the unborn not as a potential person but as a person with potential. And secondly because some of the verses border on radiological. God's sees inward details because of divine omniscience, but the radiologist sees them through the marvels of technology. We see the outside of the person, but the Lord and the radiologist see the inside. Consider verse 16, "Thy eyes beheld my unformed substance; in thy book they were written, every one of them." Embryology is the mother of anatomy, and with every radiograph secrets are revealed for one with eyes trained to see. The living God is a radiologist who knows all your secrets including things you don't know about yourself, and to trust him is a good thing because the one who knows you best loves you most and wants to be an active part of your every day.

But what about the Gospel lessons? When Jesus was criticized for offering the kingdom to the wrong kinds of people he defended himself with a medical proverb and a zinger, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous but sinners," his intent being that all are spiritually sick with the systemic malaise of sin and evil and death, and that the spiritually sane are those who know it and let Dr. Jesus work his cure on them. And the withered hand of the man who could no longer work, I wondered what it would have looked like under a fluoroscope back in the 1950's. Joints crushed, ligaments and tendons drawn and withered, perhaps some improvement through surgical correction, but Jesus offered more, a full restoration, "Stretch out your hand." Every

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honest doctor I know, though they may be reticent to confess it, runs across anomalies that cannot be explained. People who get better when death was all but certain. Something that's clear on one X-ray and gone on the next. Spontaneous remission? Well, perhaps..... Tom, who has followed his father in this craft with ever more fantastic images knows this well.

Five boys growing up in the larger-than-life shadow of such a man of learning and wide-ranging interests. One, Dickie, now gone from a melanoma not even the best could stop. And when the second parent dies, particularly one as large in their imaginations as this man, there's a larger open space and a pressing question, How will we be family? How will we love and pray for and forgive on another and find some way to walk with the same God who so marked our father and mother.

The sons of great men and the women they marry have a special challenge, one I know only too well, and as I bring this sermon to a close I remember the day it dawned on me that my parents were sinners like me and in need of the same grace that had so recently turned my life upside down. They needed the same Great Physician as I did, and perhaps for the first time I was able to see that, for all their wisdom and accomplishments, they needed the same divine aid and mercy I did.

To honor mom and dad, as the commandment requires, is not finally to put them on a pedestal, it is to honor the gift of life God gave us through their love-making and to determine to keep the good they gave us and let the rest blow away into the forgetfulness of forgiveness.

Today and tomorrow and the day after that you will make decisions that will shape the rest of your family's future. Yours is a great legacy. What will you do with it? Follow Jesus Christ in his church, and give him both voice and vote all your lives.

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