

A Witness to the Gospel at the Death of Bill McCall
Mark 6:1-13
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Death is the end of physical suffering, and with it may come a strange sense of relief, but death is not our friend. It is an alien; it is anti-life; it's an unwelcome visitor who comes knocking on every door; it's a fearsome power we resist all our days and wrestle with near the end with the help of doctors and Hospice nurses and drugs to keep the pain and anxiety at bay. Death is a thief. It steals our loved ones and breaks our hearts and leaves an empty chair at the table. The person, as we have known them, is no more, and even with our best efforts to keep them alive in our mind, memories fade even as pictures yellow and life moves on. According to St. Paul as he considers the ultimate effects of the resurrection of Jesus, "The last enemy to be destroyed is death" (1 Cor. 15:26).

In the bodily resurrection of only one person, Jesus of Nazareth, we catch a glimpse of a new world beyond the powers of death in a new creation. And if the church is right, if God has put a unique stamp of approval on Jesus by vindicating him when the powers of this world threw him away one Friday, then the last enemy has already received a fatal blow. Classic Christian faith says Jesus is worthy of our trust and loyalty because of who he was and what he did and what happened to him that first Easter morning. Our greatest and final and most fearsome enemy will be destroyed and all creation fully reclaimed and remade. God the Creator does not abandon what he has made but comes to its rescue. This God is on the side of life, and he has given the world notice of a great change in administrations that is already in the works. Jesus is the key to the future, for each person and also for the whole. He is the window into God's heart and plans, and he wants to be known and followed, not just admired or respected or even worshiped from a safe distance. He wants to rule your life because he is a king who invites all his followers to pray for his universal rule, "Thy kingdom come."

Some say death is natural, and it is if you only consider the world as it is. But that death is pervasive and its effects universal on everything that lives, be it animals or plants or people, cannot be argued. Death is a fact of life in the world as we've known it, and had not Jesus so freely and fully entered into our life and death, we would have doubts about God's intent. But in this one life and its depth of love and healing power we see the battle engaged and decisively won. God's minority report has been registered, and by trusting in and walking with the risen Jesus in this life we set up a

protest movement at the gates of death. We feed the hungry and pray for the sick and work for peace and love our enemies and find ways to fan the flames of faith and hope wherever they have burned low, even where they've been extinguished.

Now in one sense Bill was just the next guy to die, in his case of the long term effects of renal failure and diabetes and bypass and stroke with perhaps a dose of Agent Orange and the long term damage of PTSD from his days as a Sea-Bee in Vietnam. That experience did permanent damage to the man- as you all know- and only in unguarded moments did he leak out some of the horrors he witnessed as death engulfed a nation at war. So Bill was just the next guy to die. But not to this family who loved him across all his days and through all his glories and struggles. A gifted, funny man, an artisan, a master at practical jokes, a man who just last Thursday, three days before his death, was heard to say in a struggling whisper, "Something good is about to happen to me," which for him was a confession of faith. There are many deaths, but none of them is generic; it's always the death of a real person with a name and a history and stories worth telling if someone is willing to listen. Bill was not a statistic but a man in all his particularities. Every person is made in God's image and likeness; they are someone for whom Jesus came and lived and died and rose and to whom he's been offering light and grace all their days. They are of great value.

The McCall kids were, in order, Rod and Bill and Ann and Beth and Caroline, and somewhere along the genetic chain an artistic gene slipped into the pool and affected them all. We buried Beth two years ago, and I still hear reports, one only this week, of her particular gift of teaching art to children and adults. Brother in law John told us only yesterday, and with deep respect, of a day long tour across Charlotte to view some of Bill's finest stone work, and how Bill remembered the placement of every rock, how they were each chosen and fitted into a larger whole, even so the water would make a particular sound when tumbling to the next level. How do you understand a man who was a musician with water? Bill left some beauty behind, in stone, and in his relationships, and as we sat together yesterday there was pain in the room, but I sensed no crippling resentment. Take the good he gave you, and let the rest go. Receive the forgiveness of Jesus Christ for your own history of rebellion against God and pass it on generously to others and this day to Bill. You cannot blunder through this life without doing some damage. Bill did. And the way it's repaired is not through endless brooding or rehearsing the hurt but through releasing it to God. So in the days to come when your grief unearths a memory where Bill- the husband or father or brother or friend- ignored or wounded or betrayed you, remember how much you have done the same and give it

all to God. Pray and watch new freedom grow in your soul.

You may wonder why I've chosen a text from Mark instead of one of the more familiar passages about eternal life. It's for two reasons, and one of them is the Greek word *teknon*, here translated *carpenter*, "Is this not *the carpenter*, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" The second is the listing of Jesus' younger sisters and brothers which means he did not grow up alone but as the older brother in the hurly-burly mix of a large family in a small house with all the earthiness and intimacies of family life.

When we hear *carpenter* we think wood, and that is not wrong, but it's also not all the word meant. *Teknon* is a larger word for builders, which in that day included stone as well as wood. It could just as easily be translated as *mason* or *builder*. It indicated a man with calloused hands, a man of practical skills, an artisan who mastered his craft, and as ancient Nazareth is dug archaeologically, there may be foundations uncovered where Jesus actually worked, but we will never know because, unlike a painting, the work was not signed. It was enough that it be solid and well designed. Jesus was a *teknon*, and so was Bill, and so is Matthew with his flooring. You see, there is beauty and satisfaction in that kind of work known only to those who do it. The hands have their own ways of thinking. You actually make something useful, and if your older brother Rod disagrees over the work you're doing in his back yard that sets up a year long feud between the film artist and the rock artist which is eventually healed with a long hug in a back yard, it's OK. Reconciliation is such a sweet thing, and to hide away in a corner of anger is a big sin.

As we went around the room yesterday in storytelling, the room was filled with the laughter of Bill stories. Caroline remembers how he was labeled her big brother when he came back to Greenwood. Son Shane remembers being pulled out of day care to attend movies like *King Kong* and *Star Wars*. What kind of man would send his son back to daycare on a sugar high from movie candy and waving a light saber? Rod remembers a younger brother who was a natural actor, a great story teller, and one to whom people listened when he spoke. Jenna, a daughter in law, remembers times when Shane was on the road for weeks and Bill would call to fill the loneliness with long conversations that were never rushed and sustained her. How kind is that? Sandy regaled us with a Mother's Day fiasco which included an aborted fishing trip and their car- a Mustang- stuck in a creek with water running through the floor boards. Life with Bill was not a bore. Sister Ann remembers Bill scarring her and Beth nearly to death by

hiding under the bed and repeating scary lines from Rod Serling and *The Twilight Zone*. Bill Gray remembers fishing and golf and telling great lies and rude stories to one another. Here was a man you did not want to play *Trivial Pursuit* with because he had such a vast catalog of useless information in his brain and always won.

But it was when his wife Ann spoke that the room grew silent with appreciation that none of us knows all there is to know about those we know so well. Ann said, "I loved the way he sang to me. He sang Sinatra, and he did it well with a good voice." No one but her knew that; it was saved for the two of them. So when you tune your radio and hear *Young at Heart*, think of Bill the secret crooner:

"Fairy tales can come true
It can happen to you if you're young at heart (young at heart)
For it's hard, you will find
To be narrow of mind if you're young at heart (young at heart)

You can go to extremes with impossible schemes
You can laugh when your dreams fall apart at the seams
And life gets more exciting with each passing day
And love is either in your heart or on it's way

Don't you know that it's worth
Every treasure on earth to be young at heart (young at heart)
For as rich as you are
It's much better by far to be young at heart (young at heart)

And if you should survive to a hundred and five
Look at all you'll derive out of bein' alive
And here is the best part, you have a head start
If you are among the very young at heart."

But Bill did not live to a hundred plus five but only to sixty plus seven. He was worn out by war and life and bending over to pick up stones, and God's grace is seen that his death was managed at Hospice with nurses who are angels and Dr. Todd who blends faith in Jesus and the tools of end-of-life medicine with great care for the dying and their families. Thank God for those who walk with others through the valley of the shadow of death. We are not Bill's judges, and today we entrust him to the God who

is more merciful and true than any of us can imagine.

One more reason I chose this passage is to show just how difficult Jesus was to come to terms with and how skeptical the home folk were. He always reveals the stubborn resistance that lies deep in our hearts. Those who knew him best in a human sense were the most resistant to his deeper identity that did not come from the village but from above. He was not just their unmarried friend, the builder, but the very agent and Son of God soon to move beyond them to a larger work. And it was precisely that over-familiarity, that casual unbelief, that blocked his ministry among them, as in the tragic report, “And he could do not mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them. And he marveled because of their unbelief.” But there were also those who followed him, and in his company, both before and after his death and resurrection, the powers of the kingdom were operative through them in healing and releasing people from the powers of evil. What would it mean to know Jesus and to be actually used by him?

Something bad is wrong with our world and each of us, and we are all in this life together having deep effects on one another. Death is everywhere and all around us, snuffing out one, then another. But there is a place and a people where a subversive story is preserved and told and acted upon. That place and that people is the church of Jesus Christ, and there are hundred of various outposts of this movement in Greenwood alone. We are frail and faulty, but we carry a great treasure with us, and that is the old, old, story of Jesus and his love.

So whatever you do with today’s service and my words, know that there is a people who believe and who pray and who love and who bear witness and who receive and give forgiveness and who gather to bury the dead. And if you have a better story and a different hope and a superior plan to deal with the death of those you love and finally your own, I’d love to hear about it. You can always come home to Jesus Christ and to his people. We’ve always got room for one more, and we specialize in prodigals and doubters and those who’ve been away for a while! Don’t waste today, or the appeal God makes to you through Bill’s death and this service. What would it mean for the first time, or for the hundredth, to offer yourself as a follower of Jesus Christ? It is the path to life, in this life, and in the life to come. Don’t waste your loss; let your pain and unanswered questions push you towards the Savior. And in that journey, we are here to help, because we too are pilgrims.
