

A Witness to the Christian Gospel at the Death of Bill Sandel
Saturday, February 22, 2014
Pastor Phil Thrailkill, Main Street UMC
Matthew 18:1-5, Romans 14:1-12

It was not long after my arrival in Greenwood some twenty months ago that Fred Alewine collared me one day for a home visit with Bill Sandel. That was when Fred was still driving his tank of a Cadillac and endangering everyone in town! On the way over he briefed me on Bill's life and long leadership of the YMCA. I made a mental note to tell Bill that joining *The Y* was among the first things I did upon coming to Greenwood, and I had the tag on my key chain to prove it! For whatever reason, Bill had over years gotten disconnected from Main Street and Fred wanted to make sure we knew one another since- because of Bill's age- I might be here today, so in that sense Fred was not only a faithful friend to Bill but a prophet to me. I visited Bill off and on at the hospital and at Greenwood Rehab, my last visit being at Hospice on Monday afternoon, the day before he died. Though non- responsive, I read Psalm 130 to him since its first words are so fitting for one about to meet the Lord, "Out of the depths I cry to thee, O Lord." I then prayed for him and thanked God for all the lives he'd touched through athletics and leadership.

Teacher and coaches, I observe, have a different role in life than our parents. Knowledge and skills are their specialty. Mental and physical discipline are their goals, and next to my parents, it's my coaches and teachers who've left the deepest marks on my life. They handed me a book worth reading and taught me how to block and tackle, how to field a grounder, how to encourage others. They taught me how to function on a team and the joys of embracing a new idea and learning a new skill. It is a good gift of God that we have such men and women who take lesser-paying jobs than they may have had in industry in order to invest in other people's children, and when the teacher or coach is single, you sometimes get the sense that the place in their heart that was empty of their own children is filled by everyone else's. And when you think of it, so was Jesus. He was a single Jewish man who, counter to deep cultural expectations, never married, and yet who took other people's children into his arms and blessed them. And in the passage I just read from Matthew 18 you see the deep care he had for them and the severe warnings he issued to any who dared to do them harm. Imagine a two-ton millstone pulling someone down to the depths of the sea and them being utterly crushed in the darkness. That's the horrific image Jesus used for those who harm children directly or by neglect, and it is no accident the American institution to which Bill gave the best years of his life is the *Young Men's Christian Association*. Perhaps it's those who have no children who see best how precious they are and why investing in them is so important. Swimming lessons, sports teams, and

all sorts of after-school programs: all these are rooted in Bill's vision for a YMCA as a new place of common-ground here in Greenwood, and in the early 1950's in a textile town that was quite a stretch. I love going there at 5:30 in the morning and telling Gray Stallworth what a great place he runs. I am thankful, as a pastor, that in a world gone increasingly secular and politically correct, that this *Y* works hard to resist such pressures and to stay true to its Christian roots and identity. When I walk down the hall I read the Scripture passage over the door and from time to time pick up one of the Scripture verses out of the bowl and read it. Don't ever give that up. Don't ever put your light under a bushel. Don't invite folk on your board that don't share your deepest convictions.

In our first visit I had to sit close to Bill for him to hear me and I noticed the limp in his legs as he struggled to walk to his chair. He spoke of his love of sports and of all the rich friendships he shared across the masses and the classes in Greenwood. Bill was a product of what earlier in the 20th century was called *Muscular Christianity*. They saw Jesus as *a man's man*, a lean carpenter who worked with his hands and led his band of twelve merry men as if he were God's Robin Hood or their football coach. One can almost see them in a holy huddle as the sun rises over the Galilean hillside and engaging the day's contest with a hearty *Ready, Break!* Athletic metaphors were the lens through which they looked at life, and *good sportsmanship* was a summary of the highest virtues of loyalty and hard work and being a good loser when bested by a team better than your own. Life was about striving and not quitting. And while this is not the whole story of our faith, it's a part of the development of virtues which are increasingly marginalized in our culture, and when you see how many boys and young men without dads do not have access to such venues as the Boy Scouts and the YMCA, you may share my concern about the future. Folks, the US military cannot be the remedial character education program for the whole country and therefore we must guard the integrity and sustainability of such mediating institutions that fill the gaps not even the best of homes can supply, particularly with boys and young men who need re- investment. Bill did that, and it really matters!

For all his contributions to this town, Bill shared something basic with us all. He was a sinner who needed a Savior, and to remind him of that God sent Archie and Glenda Moore as the most faithful of confidants and friends. I remember how eager Bill was, when at the end of a visit I asked, "Can I pray for you?" His hand was larger than mine, and when he gripped it I thought, "I hope I get my hand back." The years took their toll on Bill; he is now absent from us but present to the Lord Jesus who nurtured Bill's virtues and mercifully covered his sins with his bright red, precious, sacrificial blood. So go by *The Y* this week and speak to Gray. Pay for a scholarship for a child from a poor home to play on a sports team or learn to swim. It is a good thing in church and life to say *We the people*. And may the YMCA never forget what the *C* in its noble name means.
