

A Witness to the Christian Gospel at the Death of Bill Tarrer
Luke 15:1-2, 11-32, 23:39-42
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We ride over bridges every day without a thought to who built them. But work went into bridges that span a river or ravine, and when we cross them in our travels we ride on the labors of their designers and builders. So it is in relationships where one person acts as bridge for another, when the trust of one who is well known is credited to one who is not known to give them an opening. And so it was for me in October of last year when Ellesor Holder, Bill's sister Kathy's best friend, texted, "I have a friend with cancer who needs help. Will you go with me to see him? His name is Bill Tarrer. He's had a wild ride and a long battle with alcoholism, and I love his family. They've been so good to me." I called back and we made an appointment to ride out to the lake after a short briefing on the larger history and its stress points so I would not go in blind.

Ellesor was concerned about Bill on several levels, but the deepest was simply spiritual. It was clear that if there was no miracle from God or fresh cure from medicine, he was going to die. Pancreatic cancer is not good news. Did Bill have a saving relationship with Jesus Christ? Did he know the grace and forgiveness that was available to him? Would there be a welcome for him at death? Would he be saved, or would he be lost? Would he reclaim his baptism from years ago or ignore it? These are not things we often talk about because they are so loaded, but when death stares on old friend in the face, hesitations fade and we get down to business.

Little did I know our first call would grow into dozen of visits over the next ten months and into a rich pastoral relationship with Bill, his father, his sister and his care givers, especially the angels we know as Hospice nurses and the fine care of Dr. Todd who helps patients and their families endure and make their way down into the valley of the shadow with comfort and care. How good it is to have physicians who are so well acquainted with our final enemy and who are willing to stay near through every battle be a loss. Where realism and love and skill and patience come together, there the grace of God is evident for frail people like us all.

The simple way to say it is that *we clicked*; by that I mean that God was at work on the scene before I arrived. I walked across another bridge. It was a prepared place,

and Bill quickly began to trust me with the story of his life which he recounted with a frankness that was refreshing. He called it what it was, shared with me the seven years of sobriety he once enjoyed, including his work traveling for AA, and how it was followed by a slide back into the advanced stages of the disease. I'm glad we know something about genetic predisposition and about family history and about the disease model for this reason: it helps us understand why some are more vulnerable than others and why it's so easy to fall back into bondage and give up the search for freedom.

In the midst of family frustrations and the painful necessities of *tough love*, it helps to know that addiction is more than bad faith or lack of will power. It's hard to watch someone do themselves in. Over the years this man did a lot of damage to himself, and so to others who loved him. His life was full of feelings of being a big disappointment, and we discussed that history in full. It was not, however the whole of his life, and you only have to sit with his brother-in-law and nephews to hear stories of how dear he was to Jonathan and David and the good times they enjoyed, particularly in a memorable vacation to St. Thomas. Because Bill never married or had children of his own, he had time for his nephews and was always enough a child in his own right to enter their play with gusto.

Bill was a bit startled one day when I turned from listening to the suggestion that what he needed was an old-fashioned round of confession, repentance, and forgiveness, and when I linked this recommendation to step four of the twelve steps- the one where you take a fearless moral inventory- it then made sense to him, and we scheduled it for our next visit. Before leaving I read I John 1:8-9 and left him to mull it over. It reads:

“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Never in thirty-eight years of pastoral ministry have I found someone so eager to confess their sins. As I walked in the door for my next visit, and even with others in the room, he said, “I'm ready to do this,” and started listing his sins with abandon. When I pushed the pause button to get others out of the room before we got down to business, he was a bit frustrated, so eager was he to be free of his guilt and shame. It is a good thing to see someone hungry for the grace of God. I prayed and then

asked, using the invitation to confession from one of our healing services:

“Bill, the Scriptures tell us to bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ. As your brother in Christ, I ask you now, are you at peace with God, or is there anything in your life that causes you to feel separated from God and less than the full person God calls you to be?”

It was then that he started, and with some encouragement from me to call his sins by their biblical names went on for a while, and when he asked, “What about the ones I can’t remember?” I said, “That’s not the point. God’s not an accountant or into small print. You’re doing just fine. It’s your heart that matters, a honest sorrow and desire to be forgiven.” When he ended it was silent, and there he sat waiting to see what came next. I stood up, went to his side, laid my hand upon his head and spoke words the church has given me to speak to repentant sinners. How sturdy they are, how carefully formulated and full of hope:

“Bill, Almighty God have mercy upon you, forgive you all your sins through out Lord Jesus Christ, strengthen you in all goodness, and by the power of the Holy Spirit keep you in eternal life. Amen.”

“Is that it?” he said with surprise and a big grin.

“Yes, Bill, that’s it, and should you die today none of it will be brought up. The guilt and penalty are gone, and now you have to learn how to deal with the new reality of being back in God’s house as a beloved son, just like the prodigal.”

Our visits then had a different shape. We discussed prayer, what it meant to forgive and receive the same from your family, and how grateful Bill was that he and his father were working through their history to a new place of respect and mutual appreciation. When I asked Kathy what she was grateful for, her reply was “The last nine months and the talks we shared. Bill was different, wasn’t he? He never lost his wit or love of sarcasm, but I felt I had my brother back. My dad did such a good job.”

Bill was on his way to death, but in the midst of the physical decline and its limitations and embarrassments, another force was unleashed, and because the kindness of Christ made him different, it changed all their relationships. No one can be reduced to their disease, whether of addiction or cancer. The person, being made in God’s image, is always more than their circumstances, and so it was with my new

friend Bill. I visited in the home about every two weeks since October, and with all the others who knew Bill observed his decline and the difficulties of pain management along the way. “Thank God for morphine,” my doctor father used to say. And I would add, “Thank God for Hospice and a beautiful, quiet place to die.”

Somewhere along the way, maybe it was just after Christmas, our conversation moved towards some of the practicalities. I assured Bill I’d bury him whether or not he was a member of Main Street, that this church wants me to serve those outside our immediate circle with no expectations. And when he asked if he could become a member, I said *Yes* and led him through a reaffirmation of his baptismal promises from long ago, the third of which says it all:

“Do you confess Jesus Christ as our Savior,
 put your whole trust in his grace,
 and promise to serve him as your Lord,
 in union with the church which Christ has opened
 to people of all ages, nations, and races?” **I do.**

Bill was never physically able to come to Sunday worship, but in our weekly prayer meetings we prayed for him, and one Sunday I announced to the congregation I had received Bill into our church circle in his home because of his illness. And that is why we are here today and why on the cover of the bulletin are the words *Member of Main Street United Methodist Church*.

Yes, it would have been much better had Bill made some different decisions earlier in life, been less headstrong to go his own way and face the duties and challenges of becoming a man without a liquid companion to lower his anxieties. Much better if Bill had turned to Christ and his embrace earlier, but then we all have our freedom and the burden of its consequences, don’t we? We are not each other’s judges in any ultimate sense.

Some of you may want to change your ways today as you consider Bill’s life and the direction of yours. You may want to join Bill and the thief on the cross in a desperate prayer, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom,” a prayer which always receives the same answer as he gazes at you knowing all, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” It’s never too late to make a fresh start. Guilt and fear and shame and dread can be removed; a new life can open in the

midst of the old.

One of my last pastoral acts was to read Psalm 130 over Bill, make the sign of the cross on his forehead and pray this prayer:

“Lord Jesus Christ, deliver your child Bill from all evil and set him free from every bond; that he may rest with all your saints, in the joy of your heavenly home, for ever and ever. Amen.”

I always had a keen sense of privilege as I made my way out to the lake. Large sections of what pastors do cannot be spoken of in public. The care of souls and of the dying requires discretion, sometimes even secrecy, but today is different. Enough has been told today to see that behind it all is the Good Shepherd who never fails to go in search of the one who wandered away. If you are looking for such a strong friend because you find yourself lost and lonely and facing forces beyond your ability, his name is Jesus, and all he wants and requires is for you to turn around, extend your hands, and ask, “Will you help me?” Bill did, and it was a very wise decision.
