

A Witness to the Christian Gospel
At the Death of Camille Clark Wolfe
Mark 15:33-16:8
December 8, 2012

There was a toughness and a realism about Camille Clark, eventually Camille Wolfe, that her family grew to appreciate, though perhaps not always in the immediate application, especially when it came to the two girls Carol and Jane, the issue of boys, and life in 1960's Washington. MYF in the Methodist church they attended on Sundays was about the only safe place for a rendezvous!

It was 1930, at the front end of a Depression that would not end for more than a decade, that Camille's father James died. She was eight years old and living in Arkansas. With her sister Doris and brother James they lived through the tough times that followed. Life was difficult, and there were times apart, but what courage and grit Camille picked along the way, whatever hardscrabble virtues she earned, came to fruition in her being accepted into the Baptist Memorial Hospital nursing program in Memphis, Tennessee. That was an important step on the way to a new life and a long career in what was then one of the only professions open to women at large.

I know this because my mother Betty traveled a parallel route in the days when hospital-based nursing program were a highly-disciplined controlled atmospheres for young women: full of hands-on care, bed pans, endless blood pressures, long hours and-when contrasted with today- not many medicines. But on the day you received your nursing pin, your hat and cape, on that day you entered the ranks of modern day Florence Nightingales as angels of mercy. I'm sorry, but scrubs and security badges hung around the neck are just not the same.

It's hard to tell who's a nurse these days, but there was a day- I am told by my mother- that the letters *R.N.* carried about the same weight as the three stipes up and two down of an Army sergeant. How smart Camille looked in her Army Nurse uniform with the brass crest on the front of her short-billed hat, just like the face on the recruiting poster that drew her attention away from Memphis, "Join the Army Nurse Corps." If the Germans wounded them, she would help heal them. Youthful idealism plus good training is a formula for a broadening world, and so it was for Miss Clark, an R.N. from Earle. Imagine the skips from the States to an eventual posting in Frankfurt, seeing first hand the devastation and poverty our bombs brought only months before, looking into

wounds you'd only seen in medical books but not first hand, now attached to young men your own age with girlfriends back home.

Camille's graduation certificate and those accouterments of the nursing office and the Army years, wherever they are, are now family heirlooms, and if any doubt a young woman can find her way forward out of tough circumstances with a bit of faith and a load of grit, consider Camille and her path up from Arkansas, through Memphis, off to Germany, and eventually to D.C. and life in the nation's capital before retirement in Greenwood. On the back of your bulletin is the Creed of her Corps, and I am stirred the way it ends, "Courage to Care, Courage to Connect, Courage to Change."

What Camille took off to war she then brought home and folded into the life of her family. Surviving, faith-filled, tough, innovative, making do, keeping guard, bringing skill to wounded bodies and souls, showing courage to care, connect, and change. I am concerned we are losing those values, aren't you? and that with the passing of a generation that endured hardship and saved freedom we are headed into days when the internal fortitude may not equal the external challenges. Virtue is from the Latin for strength, *virtus*, and it is through challenge they are earned. Self-indulgence and the despair of a *whatever* attitude build nothing but a bad future. After time at home with her young brood, she picked up her profession again at Doctor's Hospital. It was just too much a part of who she was to lay aside forever.

I've done enough funerals, especially of World War II era folk, that I've learned some of the questions to ask, the best of which is perhaps, Do you know how your parents met? And this is a really good one. When the war in Europe ended in May 1945, Randy- a B-26 Marauder pilot- shifted to Transportation Command, and as a junior officer in Frankfurt took his turn for a month running the *O-club*, and what is a party without someone to dance with?

At Randy's request the base colonel called the hospital colonel to send over some nurses. Remember, this was nearly seventy years ago before the advances of modern feminism, and requisitioning what was needed was standard protocol. But there was a logistics problem. The bus was broken, so -as a man of ingenuity- Randy sent over a weapons carrier as limo service. They met at the party and reconnected in the States for a marriage. So if any asked, "How did you and Camille meet?" Randy- a gentleman in every regard- could say with a smile, "I requisitioned her from supply and unloaded her off a weapon's carrier. She then joined my crew as Navigator and co-pilot."

What a great movie scene that would have made. Robert Stack or Gregory Peck playing Randy Wolfe! I can almost hear the Andrews sisters singing in the background! And that marriage lasted until Monday evening when- as the vows of the church end so solemnly, they were *parted by death*. She was ready to die, and when the call came to the house that evening, Randy knew their joint plans not to prolong dying had been a good decision. It was, for this family, the end of an era. Life with Camille, and now life without her, trusting her to the care of the God who offered her a good life and then a new life in Jesus Christ. Only a week ago yesterday she asked Jane, “Am I going to get better?” to which Jane replied, “Momma, sometimes it’s OK to let go.” And, as she approached death, Randy was there with a loving touch and a simple reminder, “I’m here.”

I was privileged to receive a call Monday afternoon that Camille had been carried to Hospice House. I left an appointment and was there in about half an hour to hear some family stories, then to lay my hands on her head and commission her for her next assignment in the church victorious, there to await the end of the age and the resurrection of the death. There I learned that grandson David and son Charlie are both patent attorneys. I also learned that Charlie soon travels to Munich and the E.U. Patent Court. And, since The Honorable Alec Clelland- Chief Justice of that court- is a friend of mine and reader of my sermons who uses them to teach Sunday School, I intend to give Charles my card to pass on to the judge. Small world indeed!

In our discussion, Carol spoke of her bi-monthly visits here to Greenwood and of earlier days when mom and dad delighted in visits to Texas. Two of the most important phrases for this family, especially with the fresh crop of great-grans, are *Remember when?* and *Did you know that?* And when those cues are followed by stories, watch as young minds soak in the history and learn what it is to be a Wolfe, an American citizen, and perhaps even a Christian of faith and courage with a heart to serve others. So make plastic models of B-26 Marauders; read whoever wrote the best history of the Army Nurse Corps, and visit Arlington where her remains will soon reside. I remember once walking between the rows and finding the stone of my uncle Col. Harvey Lewis who was on Eisenhower’s invasion staff. History and honor are never far away; they are written in the lives of our families and those we love.

We live by the stories we retell, and this family has a rich vein to mine. It was the stories I heard around the family table, overheard on phone conversations and at reunions that gave me a sense of roots, place, belonging, and responsibility. Dare to be

different in an age indifferent to history and tradition. Pass on a legacy that will sustain those who will know Camille and her tough and loving version of Christian faith only through the reports of others. And as this family anticipates the eventual passing of Randy sometime between now and age 105, make a decision to stick together, even as you are scattered across the nation and around the world. Let one become the family historian, another the communicator, another the family hub, another the keeper of birthdays and anniversaries and prayer lists. Don't miss a wedding or a funeral or a baptism. Love God, follow Jesus Christ, honor and support the church, forgive each other, live with courage and integrity so that when your time comes- as with Camille- there will be more good to say than time to say it.

The word *courage* has been used several times, and that is because Camille's children mark it as the cardinal virtue that seasoned her mother's love and wisdom. Jane- who lives close by and managed much of her parents' care- said with deep devotion Tuesday evening, "My mother was the most courageous woman I ever knew."

Some may wonder why I chose the Gospel lesson from the end of Mark rather than one of the more standard funeral passages. I chose it because of the prominent role women played by courageous women, a band of sisters who *followed* Jesus from Galilee, *provided* for the movement out of their means, *stayed* at the horror of cross when the men fled, *marked* the place where Jesus was buried and were *first at the tomb* to receive the shocking and eerie message of Easter: Jesus is alive, and his movement continues. They provided the eye-witness continuity that grounds our common faith in history, not just rumor or wish-fulfillment.

And to think, Camille now knows all these women by name as friends, including the Lord's own mother. You knew her, and now she knows them! Thousands of years of separation vanish in the presence of Jesus. And if that is a new idea for you, it is time for your to recover and explore and own for yourself the great riches of the Christian faith, because you don't really want to live or die without it. And so when you are in church and hear the call to confess the faith, and when you come to the phrase in the Apostle's Creed *I believe in the communion of the saints*, pause and remember that you now have a new a personal stake in such matters. Camille wants to see you again, and there is only one way for that to happen. Get to know her Lord and his people. Don't let the grief and the memories and the gratitude of this day go to waste.

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