

A Witness to the Christian Gospel at the Death of Charlie Maloney
Saturday, December 27, 2014
John 5:19-30
Pastor Phil Thrailkill

Charlie Maloney was an easy man to be around. With some men you feel a bit tense in their presence, a little unsure of where you stand, but not with Charlie. He was an open-hearted man, and what you saw is what you got. I only knew a small slice of Charlie and Sue's life during the past two and half-years, and I never knew Charlie as a well man. What I did see, and what sustained him, was a wide circle of white and black buddies who'd worked with him or for him, or others who shared an interest in sports together, say he and George Balletine's holy pilgrimages to Death Valley. A week ago today, during my last visit with Charlie, he told he'd been born in Adel, Georgia in 1931. And when I said, "Those were hard times," he grinned and said, "Yea, they was, but we didn't know it. We never went without food." And while the clothes Charlie went off to Clemson in may not have met current styles for frat guys, he finished in four years on a football and ROTC scholarship. Clothes don't make the man, but a dose of military discipline and the teamwork of football just might do the trick. His gifts made a way for Charlie, having been All-State halfback in 1949.

But my best guest is that it was his human relationship skills, what scholars now call *emotional intelligence*, which is the peculiar gift of being able to read people's emotions and find ways to meet their needs that opened doors for Charlie; it's what being a successful State Farm agent is all about. In Charlie's days with the company you could word hard for maybe twenty years, then have such a good staff that they could do most of the work for you, which left lots of time for what agents then called *business cultivation*, translated in the South as huntin' and fishin' and golfin', which I'm told was Charlie's favorite. When I once mentioned our local agent Buddy Brooks in Cheraw he smiled and said, "I hear he could hit a one iron a long ways!"

During our last visit Charlie and I had a big laugh together. When I walked in his upper plate was in a cup of yellow-brown fluid on the table. When I looked and saw a second, larger container nearby, I said, "Charlie, you might want to put your glasses on when you take your uppers out; it could avoid a bad experience. Don't

want you to drop your choppers by accident in the wrong container.”

He looked at me and laughed. “I’m careful pastor, and don’t you worry at bit; its just some sweet tea to keep-em-moist.”

And when I said, “Yea, and don’t you be smugglin’ any clear fluids in her for you and George. They tell me you’re ordering all ginger-ales they days, and it’s causing a little stir down at the nutrition closet. It’s against the rules, and it makes the Baptists mad.” He laughed again, and then told me a good story which shall remain confidential.

Women just don’t understand the humor between men- rough and tumble as is it- but Charlie did, and loved it. I suspect there were times with Jesus and the twelve were glad to be away from the sensitive ears of women. One of the delights of heaven, if only for men, will be hearing some of the stories Jesus and the guys told around campfires late a night, the kind of laughter and comradery all men hunger for down deep in their souls. Humor is a form of grace, and when properly applied is a merry medicine for the heart. Charlie and I laughed about something at every visit.

If memory serves me correctly, I then read Charlie part of the Christmas story and prayed with him, then said, “Buddy, remember that you belong to Jesus and that you belong to us. You are not forgotten, and you are not alone. And when the end comes, you’re going to be OK. But let’s take a minute and pray for more good days.”

It was clear to us both-without a lot being said- that Charlie’s lungs were going to fail soon. I’d been with his family six or eight weeks ago when the decision was made in consultation with both his doctor sons to withdraw breathing support and see what happened. Charlie surprised us all with a comeback which he and I laughed about several times. He told me of the falls at home, how they frightened Sue and the children, and how he’d come to the decision he might never go home again. He spoke with great appreciation of Sue, of Mike and Jay and Lisa, and of the grands and one great-grand, and especially of Jake who held a special place in his heart and who visited us off and on here at Main Street.

It was just after visiting Charlie that I went by the house to speak to Jake since I’d not seen him since his mother Sherry’s death only a few weeks ago. Sue looked surprised to see me, told me Jake had gone back to Gainesville and that she would pass on my condolences. And when I said, “Charlie’s not doing good, is he?” she nodded and we parted with a hug.

Charlie and I shared a ritual you may or not have noticed over the last several years. Here was a man whose life medicine had extended, but the medicines that kept down inflammation also thinned out his skin and brought on a host of other problems; I'm speaking about prednisone and steroids. His skin was like parchment and about as easily torn. His heart was full of both faith and realism, but his body was running down because there wasn't enough surface left in those hardening lungs to keep him going. To watch him hobble into church and find his seat touched me deeply. To watch him mouth the words to familiar hymns made me sing better. He knew the value and would be here if physically possible. I admired his toughness and grit. He wanted to be with his friends and with his God in worship. It gave him strength.

It's my custom on communion Sundays to after the service pray for the sick, and month after month Charlie would humbly come forward for me to anoint him with oil on the forehead and to pray for strength and healing and sometime for one his kids or grands. Here was a man who was falling apart, and who felt his need for God's touch so keenly. I prayed with him over twenty times I guess; neither one of us knew how God used our prayers. One day we will and laugh again.

Those of you who lived with Charlie in his home and who knew him over the years know his sins and flaws and frailties much better than I do, but that is not the point. We all have such, and we are grateful to all the people who put up with us with such mercy and faithfulness, including God. But where Charlie is today I have no doubt, not because of any of his achievements or good deeds, but because in a simple way that sustained him with a dose of humor and realism to the end, Charlie knew the person and the benefits of Jesus Christ through trust and experience.

I'm glad we had that last of many visits, and the truth is that every time I left one of Charlie's sick rooms, at home, at the hospital or at rehab, I felt encouraged. Charlie knew he was loved by you who are here today, and by the Lord to whose table he regularly came to hear those powerful words repeated, "Charlie, the body and blood of Christ given *for you*." In The Gospel of John it is written, "For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will" (5:21). And that promise is for Jesus' friend Charlie. The eternal life Charlie knew during his earthly days opened at his death into part two, which is the life of a saved soul in heaven; but stage three still awaits him and us all; it is the coming down of the kingdom of God and the great resurrection of the death. Charlie was saved in this life by simple trust in Christ; the fruit and reward of that trust is his present life in heaven,

but there is still more to come. Heaven is not our final destination but stopover on the way to the fullness of God's kingdom in the resurrection of the dead and the renewal of the whole creation, thus the final words of Creed, "We... believe in the resurrection of the dead and the life everlasting," not in heaven but down here. God does not abandon the good creation but heals and restores it in Jesus Christ.

It was a verdict of life that Charlie received early Christmas-Eve morning when he died. And in that moment, I believe all the Christmas carols he'd ever sung, all the gifts he'd even given or received, all the bright eyes of his children with the wonder of the next morning, came together in a rush of understanding and appreciation for Jesus and for a church that keeps his story alive on a thousand street corners with endless candlelight services and children's bathrobe dramas. As we sing at the end of *Silent Night*, "Christ the Savior is born. Christ the Savior born."

I was with Charlie a week ago today. The next evening the flu started, and so I couldn't go back to the nursing home lest I set off a plague and be run out of town for killing off fifty old people. I knew we were near the end; I did not know it would be our last conversation. We talked, we laughed, we remembered, we read Scripture, prayed and we said goodbye. Isn't that what serious Christian living is all about? Carrying on those kinds of conversations across the whole of life. Charlie knew the story from long exposure, and in his dying days trusted it ever more fully. How about you? Where do you stand with the old, old, story and its living author. It really is the only story strong and true enough to sustain you through life and carry you with hope into the world that is to come. Charlie wants you to be there and to live now in the light of Christ. Getting to know Jesus and his people is always something you can put off. It's never convenient and rarely urgent, but it really matters because it shapes who you are and who you are becoming as you prepare for life's certain end, and it is my job to say this since Charlie can't be with us today. There is nothing more important than that you find some seat on a local pew and call it your own every Sunday. It is where life is reshaped in a way found nowhere else.
