

A Witness to the Gospel at the Death of Cora Lee Starling
Luke 10:25-42
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There is an order to the Ten Commandments. The first three are about the unique status of the One, Living, and True God who rescued the Jews from Pharaoh and made them a showcase of divine workings. So the first command is that there are no others who receive the ultimate devotion of worship since you owe the one who saved you. The second is there are to be no images as if you could capture the Lord in something earthly. And thirdly that his name is not to be attached to anything unworthy of his holy and loving character, nothing vain or empty or silly or perverse. The fourth is that the Lord's dwelling is not a place on earth but a temple in time, a day in seven in which to recall that you are a human being and not just a human doing. The next six that form the second table about human relations among those who know this great, rescuing God, and the first of these, commandment five, is carefully worded, "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long on the land which the Lord your God gives you."

Cora Lee, I believe from the testimony of her children, both fulfilled that command and received its promise in the gift of her ninety-six years, which until the last three weeks were remarkably vital, afternoons full of endless card-playing and her number one food group— chocolate— especially her favorite form of chocolate, Hershey's Kisses, whose tiny, rolled up, silver foiled wrapping fell behind her as a trail of evidence. "Where's Cora?" someone might asked. "Well," another voice would reply, "just follow the silver wrappers." I'm told that when the Lord first invent the cocoa pod on the third day, he smiled at the angels and said, "This is to delight my servant Cora Lee Starling, for she will love it best of all!"

Her special grace is that her character and love have made it so easy for her children to honor her as well, just as they honored their father Hubert, so I expect many of you to be long-livers as well. Just a month ago, I'm told, Cora was still making her world-famous biscuits, the same ones that once filled a package to Ben that was overnighted at the cost of a \$130.00.

Think of the dedication it took to transcribe the three hundred Civil War letters between her great-grandfather and great-grandmother, and how she honored their

marriage in that act of devotion. Do you hear a theme in this family, the theme of honoring those who whose union gave us life and of the link of love and honor between the generations? So I expect this lake house to remain a place of family pilgrimage and for the stories of Cora and Hubert to be told for generations to come. And in the years to come, when Mae and Beth are no longer blonds but gray and white with streaks of yellow, and when one of them says, "I remember when momma said...." I expect the other to say, "No, this is what she said...." and for both to smile.

But this is not how Cora's life started, and no one would have betted she'd even survive. On March 6, 1919, the day of her birth, she weighed in at twenty-four ounces, a full pound and a half, and this was long before ICU's for newborns. So what was the best they could do as they waited for her to die? Wrap her up, put her in a shoe box in an open drawer and feed her buttermilk, likely with an eyedropper. I'm told it gave her a long relationship to buttermilk.

Perhaps as the story of her miracle of survival was told and retold, she developed a sense that God was to be trusted with the whole of life. And so, as her twins, her daughter in law Kay, and her caretaker Marlene all said to me together around the kitchen table, "Cora would always say, 'I take all my burdens and lay them at the Lord's feet, and then I don't worry.'" Beth said more than once, "My mother was never in a tizzy about anything. It was when we were asleep as kids that she got her housework done."

If one of the themes of Cora's life was to honor father and mother, and grandmother and grandfather, then another theme was hospitality associated with kids and food, but then that was also her work since she taught food service at the Career Center for much of her adult life. Since the family lived near Connie Maxwell, it was not uncommon during the summers for thirty girls to be with them at the lake one day, then thirty boys the next, and for all to be treated as if they were Cora and Hubie's own. Mae tells me of her college girlfriends, some of whom just moved in with them at the lake for the summer and also had to take their time pulling weeds and picking vegetables in the garden.

Family reunions sometimes lasted a week, including week long tournaments around the card game *Setback*. On the wall in her kitchen is an official looking certificate which reads, "World's Greatest Card Player: Cora Lee Starling." It's one of the things that kept her mind alive for so long.

When I heard that Hospice had been called in several weeks ago after a hospital stay, I visited Cora Lee several times. And each time I arrived the kitchen and bedroom were full of people. Beth and Mae and Marlene- to whom I may be kin on both sides because of our Saluda and Galivant's Ferry links! and Kay and Hubie and Jimmy and the Hospice Nurse, each of them devoted to this dear woman, each in their own way. You see, when the second parent dies, it's the end of a generation, and everyone moves up a level in their responsibility for others. Who among you will pick up the pieces of Cora's love and keep them alive?

By all accounts this is a large, connected, happy and loved family. Now no families are perfect, and there are always things to forgive, but this Starling clan— with all their kin and connections— was far happier than most. Mae said it was not until high school she found out all families were not like hers. Until then she assumed all had as much fun and love as they did. It was a sad insight, but it made what they had even more precious.

It was just a year ago that Cora Lee could be found swinging in a porch swing with her great grandchildren, and just a few years before that be found on the floor playing trucks and making a *Varoom* sound with one of the same. I'm told she regularly pestered her children with the weekend request, "When can I pick up the grandchildren?" She was happiest when surrounded by her family, and if extras just happened to walk in, the woman who could not be flustered made room for all in her heart and at her table, one reason being that she always cooked in large industrial sized pans just to be ready!

It was just three weeks ago when Chris pulled up in his new police cruiser that Cora Lee not only admired it but got in the back seat and acted like she was a criminal he'd just picked up! She was a hoot, wasn't she?

Cora Lee loved her family, loved the arts of cooking and hospitality, always made loving people more than keeping a spotless house, and had a place in her heart for whoever wandered in. She also talked to animals and birds with whom she appeared to have a kinship of trust, especially with several ducks to whom she gave pet names, the most pompous of which was tagged *Mr. Stupendous!* On Tuesday afternoon, as we sat at her kitchen table and listened to Cora Lee stories, someone quipped, "She could have called an earthworm out of the ground if they could hear!"

You see, if you beat the odds like she did as a severely premature child, and if you believe every child you bear and everyone who walks into your home is a gift, then this is how you live, with a trust that says over and over, “I take all my burdens and lay them at the Lord’s feet, and then I don’t worry.” And if she had a creed, this was it. Much more could be said, but these are the highlights I received from the family, and if in the next weeks and months they kick off a chain of other Cora Lee and Hubie stories, this is one of the ways this family can together fulfill the commandment to honor father and mother and receive the promise.

Now why have I chosen the stories of the Good Samaritan and the contrast of Mary the devoted one and Martha the fretful one as the text for today’s message? Because of why Luke put them side by side since the first teaches the active love of neighbor and the second the love of God who shows us his face in Jesus Christ. Here were two stories to furnish our minds with stories of what it means to love God with all we are and our neighbor as ourselves. If there’s a need in front of you, and if you can do something about it- even if the cost is great- then get on it! And if you have to choose in a pinch between serving and devotion, always put devotion first because without it serving quickly becomes drudgery. And in Cora’s life we see these two great themes woven together. Love God and love people. Let your devotion and love for Jesus Christ fill you and then overflow on others. What else is there?

It may surprise some of you to remember that Cora Lee, the woman whose life we savor and honor today, was a sinner in need of a Savior. And what she would most want for all of us today is that her death become the occasion for many of us to open our hearts to God afresh. And so this day I invite you to open your heart to the Savior, to the Jesus who meant so much to her, whose fame she taught to children in Sunday School at Main Street, whose light and love shown through her with such a steady force. She was not a self-made woman; her life was a long project of rich partnership with God, and that is why it is so full of delightful memories. The pain of losing two children, Suzanne and Richard- blow that it was- did not push her away from God but towards him; it was one more thing to surrender and not worry about, though none of us know how often she brought them to mind. The same God who saved her at birth and who sustained her all her days is available to us today. So when the benediction is said and you leave her graveside, don’t dismiss this opportunity to reflect on her graced life and to consider your own mortality. The God who did such good things in her can do the same for you.

It is possible— even in the world as it is— to live a life of love and service that brings love and joy to others, and of that Cora Lee was a living example. She left a mark on each of you, and it is a call to do just what she did, which is ask God to put his shoulder under your load, whatever it may be. The prayers she prayed for each of you are more an influence than you know.

You can't live her life, and you can't bring her back. The fragile little one who started life in a shoe box of a coffin is now in the peace and glory and joy of heaven for which every good and sweet thing in this life was a sign. And, in the communion of the saints, she awaits the resurrection of the dead and the descent of the kingdom of God to transform all that is.

One of the clever ways God draws us to himself is by hooking our hearts so deeply to those who know and walk with him and who make a place for us in their hearts, and such a one was Cora Lee. So if you love her, and if you miss her, and if there's an empty space at the table, then ask, "Lord, how am I to live and love in the light of the gift that was Cora Lee?"

Oh, and if in the back corner of the freezer you find any of those biscuits, please save one for me! I wonder if they have some buttermilk in them?
