

**A Witness to the Christian Gospel
at the Death of my Aunt: Flo Semken
Isaiah 25:6-9, Matthew 11:25-30
Pastor Phil Thrailkill, Main Street UMC**

Ninety-five years is a long time to be on this earth. Florene Elizabeth Turner was born December 1, 1919 with the aid of a local midwife in Alford and Daisy's Turner's farm house a month and a half after the Treaty of Versailles was finalized that ended World War I. Though Coward, SC was not a cultural center, Flo lived through the roaring Twenties, the depressed Thirties, the world war Forties, the rebuilding Fifties, the cultural revolution Sixties, and five more decades we have yet to name. She was there when first light bulb came on over the kitchen table after the REA lines were run down the dirt road in front of their home.

Ninety-five years; that's a long time and a lots of newspapers to read. And through all of that change my Aunt Flo maintained a consistency of character and faith in our Lord that sustained her to the very end. It was not always an easy life, but it was a good one. She grew up in a country church and today we make St. Johannes Lutheran her final earthly resting place, a German immigrant church where her husband Ernst had roots. For Flo's mental and physical vitality to carry her all the way to the end was evidence of God's blessing and of the internal resources he gave her to live every day to her best and with joy.

There was a toughness and a realism about Flo I always admired, even when I did not know how to name it. Dear friends, to die with good medical care surrounded by your children and the care of the church is as good as it gets. And with Nurse Barbara as your assertive advocate, it's even better! There were several times in the late summer and fall of this year we thought death was near, but somehow Flo kept making a comeback, so robust was her constitution. It was not uncommon for me to receive a call from Barbara with some humorous story how her mother had again cheated death and come back to re-engage life. We laughed out loud, and then Barbara would let me pray with Flo on the phone. I remember thinking to myself with great emotion, "This dear woman is not going to be with us much longer," and with that thought in mind I asked God to do good for Flo, thanked her for all her interest in and kindness to my daughter Ellen during her dental school years, and told her we loved her. I also laughed with Susan when, after Flo went into an apparent

coma, she opened her eyes about a week later and exclaimed in a clear voice, “I think I had a stroke!”

One of the special roles of being a pastor is ministry to your extended family, to *be on call* when needed by the larger Turner class. My very first funeral as a young pastor was Alford’s in 1977. Later I sang an Elvis hymn and spoke at Miss Nettie’s, and participated in James’, Wilbur’s, Marguerite’s, Essie’s, and now Flo. Only two remain, Jennie and my mother Betty, and I intend to outlive them both and be there for them! They all came up on the same farm of sandy loam just across Lynches River on the Old Georgetown highway. What was originally a royal land grant from the King, I am told, had been cut down over several generations to hundred acre plots, enough with the help of sharecroppers and a pair of mules I still remember to support a family and live a decent, country life. They all grew up with Turner family to the left and the right and across the river their mother’s family the Wards, whose reunion I still attend, eager for every scrap of history.

But in December of 1930 a tragedy happened, one that permanently changed the shape of life for them and for of us since it echoes still. A log rolled out of the fireplace and a burning cinder set Daisy’s flannel robe on fire with my mother, then fifteen months old, in her arms. Our grandmother was severely burned and died several weeks later at McLeod’s of pneumonia from burned lungs and no antibiotics. It left a house of seven children and a forty-year-old farmer with no wife just as the Depression was picking up steam. Hard times, but family was nearby, and they helped. So four sisters became mothers to a toddler named Betty in the years before Mrs. Winnie came along to fill the gap, and even latter when Alford married the inimitable Mrs. Nettie for whom everyone was grateful for her care of their father.

Now I do this mini-review of Turner history to make a point, and that is something about the phrase *the communion of the saints* which we find in the Apostle’s Creed. Those who know the Lord are bound by bonds stronger than death. We are knit together in the one body of Christ, and one of the healing joys of heaven will be to see again those we lost who shared our faith and trust in Jesus. Can you image the joy when Marguerite, whose life was so marked with such loss and medical tragedy, was hugged again by her mother, and how about her son Alford who also died in the care of the state? And what about James and Glenn and Essie and now Flo? They breathed their last breath and found themselves in a heaven they had sung about in hymns all their lives. And it was truer-than-true. There was mother and

father, and with that embrace a part of them was made whole again through the grace of God. All the Turner kids had a hole in their heart, and it was named Daisy, and nothing of this earth could fill it. It's one of the reasons family was so important to Flo who never ceased to speak with pride of her children, grand-children, and great-grandchildren. All I had to do was mention the name of one, and stories of all would flow because she kept up with the details of Kevin and Heather and Elizabeth, their spouses, and children.

Flo knew how precious and fragile is the link between the generations because when she was only eleven, her mother was taken. And as this generation leaves this life for stage one of their new life, since heaven above is to be followed by the resurrection of the dead and the renewal of all the earth in stage two, the wounds of this life are finally healed. As the spiritual says so well, *they lay their burdens down*. Such is the love of God shown to us in the life, and especially in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ on which the whole of the Christian faith hangs suspended. When human care can do no more, when there are no more stints to be placed and no miracle drugs to administer, there remains the care of the Great Physician. No more tears, no more deep ache in the heart, no more longing or precious memories but a new reality, that for which we have longed.

What do I remember? I remember visits to their home on Riverland Terrace, just across the Wapoo Cut. I remember as a goofy young boy admiring my cousins Barbara and John and Susan with their 60's fashions, record collections, and ultra-cool friends. When you are from the hinterlands of Cheraw, Charleston is an impressive place. I remember trips in the red and white Ford to Folly Beach and attending their weddings. I remember good food served at the kitchen table and an aunt who always added a special touch of kindness. I remember once visiting Flo at her workplace at Condon's downtown and being impressed that she worked at such a fine place and knew so many who shopped there by first name.

I remember Flo taking pride in her appearance and always looking fine in her clothing. It was pride, not in the negative but in the positive sense. It bothered her to have wind-blown hair. I remember Ernst and being proud I had an uncle who worked on nuclear subs, though it was eventually his undoing through asbestos. I remember visiting his bedside and praying with him shortly before he died, and I remember saying to him that he was the *funniest* of all my uncles, and he was! Flo was patient with Ernst; you all know that and admire her for it, and eventually he

came around to everyone's relief to become a doting grandfather! When Flo took those wedding vows, she meant them, and she was good for a man who loved good times. Such is the shaping power of a virtuous wife, and that Flo was.

I always envied the Semkens for living in Charleston, for their height, and for how quickly they were ready to play a game or go to a party. The travels of Flo's children is a tribute to a mother who gave them curiosity about a larger world from a safe home base. She gave them roots, and she gave them wings, and she did it for more than one generation. The axis of her life was Highway 52, and I mean by that the route that runs from Coward to Charleston. Only God knows how many times she traveled that ribbon of asphalt back to see her dad, then back to the Holy City for her life with Ernst and children. It was her footprint. And while her wanderings took her elsewhere, she was still a Turner girl from Coward who moved to Charleston and met a tall, lean Navy guy with a brogue he never lost, and never wanted to! Were people just better looking in those days? To me the pictures of that generation all look like movie stars.

Barbara, John, and Susan each have a special cache of memories about their mother. How she sacrificed and filled the gap, how she wanted them to be the equal of anyone and look their best, get an education, and make something of themselves. And they have, every one of them, because such was her faith, her prayer, and her shaping power. A nurse, a teacher, a businessman. They are no longer young, but then neither am I, and today they say an earthly farewell to the most important person in their lives, their mother who carried them, labored for them, cooled their fevered brows, made them do homework, welcomed their friends, took them to church, and paid for two weddings! The biblical command is that we honor father and mother all our days because it is one of the keys to a long and fruitful life. We are to forgive them where necessary and to treasure all the good they poured into us. This is our sacred task, along with making sure this faith is passed to the next generation.

One of the most precious insights of adulthood is to come to terms with the humanity of our parents, that they were once young and full of dreams and more like us than we imagine, and that along the way life bruised and disappointed them. They loom so large when we are small, and over the years, if we become as wise as they, we see them through the eyes of love, and this is something these three children have done so well. After Ernst's death, they invited their mother back into a full life of travel and adventure and fun, of cocktails and good restaurants. Susan wrote me of

memorable trips with her mother that built on the tradition of their yearly trips to Shelby to see Essie and company when she was a child. Elizabeth finds that when she recalls memories of her Mama, her heart feels full and she can taste again the pound cake with peaches. Kevin recalls what it meant to have two grandparents so close to care for him as a child, teenager, and young man. Elizabeth speaks for all when she writes:

“Over the years, you have showed us how to be a hard worker, keep a clean house, a deep faith with God and your church, a love for reading, a well put together outfit, and having patience with loved ones. Thank you for being you.”

Could there be a finer tribute? And when you add to this Flo’s pride at Heather being a physician and giving such good care to mothers and their newborns, you can see how Flo’s cup was always full. And while Flo kept these three grans especially close to her heart, there was always room for one more, because that is how love is. When my daughter Ellen arrived in Charleston to begin dental school, a gift was given, and that gift was Flo, who took Ellen under her wing and to many fine restaurants. They became fast friends, devoted to one another across the generations, and that is a gift Lori and I treasure. She not only mothered her sister Betty after 1930, she mothered Betty’s granddaughter the four years she was in Charleston. That is consistency of love, and it is in short supply in our day. She loved the generations, and that is a bright reflection of the love of God that was in her.

Flo took her pain and losses- and only she knows some of the details- and turned them into love that was both tough and tender, and she was enabled to do this and to suck the goodness from life because she knew her Maker and the one who came for her in Jesus Christ. On December 27, 2014, two days after her final Christmas, Flo died, and the next thing she heard was the voice of Jesus saying, “Welcome home, old friend, good and faithful servant. Enter into my joy, the first of which is to feel Daisy’s hug again and your dad saying, “I’m so proud of you.” This is not a pious fantasy; this is the hope we have as Christians, that when the gift of this life is over, we are just beginning to explore the full riches of God’s love for each of us and for all who have said Yes to Jesus Christ. How do I account for the life of my Aunt Flo? She was introduced to the Lord early on, and they lived together all her life. You could do no better than to follow her faith and her example, so that when it comes time for your life to end, there will be some rich memories to feast upon.
