

A Witness to the Christian Gospel at the Death of Gray Moore
Luke 5:17-26
November 9, 2013
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At the center of classic Christian faith is the startling affirmation that Jesus is the human face of God, and that he has come among us to heal our broken relationship with our Father in heaven and give us a new beginning and a sure hope. We who have wandered far from home are invited to return and here in the church along with fellow pilgrims to learn a new way of loving and living as we follow Jesus towards a kingdom that will one day engulf and transform all that is. “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” is our constant prayer for a world with no more tears or pain, no more sin and evil, no more death and loss. We long to be made whole and full of joy because we were originally designed for such, and that yearning is itself a promise of things to come. If there is thirst, then there must be water; and if there is hunger, there must be food, and if there is a longing nothing in this world can satisfy, then perhaps we are headed towards another world where such intimations are fulfilled.¹ We live and love and die and suffer here, but we were made for more, and one day it shall be.

When we say Yes to Jesus, however and whenever that happens, the Holy Spirit arrives to take up residence within to light the way and make the wisdom of Scripture practical. As with a radio beacon, we now have a receiving set within to receive divine communications. God comes to dwell within the self, here to begin the long process of restoration we call salvation. For some the progress seems more rapid because of their eager participation; for others it appears to unfold in fits and start and long seasons of dormancy and neglect, but even here God is at work in hidden ways. Even at our weakest, as Gray was these final weeks, we can be a signpost for others. In recent days a friend visited Gray and confessed he was about to leave his family, so great was his frustration with life, and head off to Alaska. In his bed of pain, Gray implored him not to do this foolish thing but to stick with his wife and children and work it out. It appears to have tipped things in the right direction, and it is in just such unexpected interactions that what we believe is most clearly seen. I’m glad Gray had that opportunity.

Our friend Gray was a part of that grand process which is not yet over, even for him. He is forgiven; he is now beyond the reach of sin and evil and ignorance and addiction and illness and shame and guilt and fear and legs that don’t work; he is with

¹ A paraphrase of C.S. Lewis.

God in heaven which is the invisible part of creation, not far away but just out of sight; his soul is saved, but the final act of the great drama remains future, and that is the great resurrection of the dead when Gray and all who know Christ, the living and the dead, will receive marvelous new bodies like that of Jesus on Easter morning which will fit us for life in the new creation, which is nothing other than this world made new and whole and better than Eden ever was.² What God has made and has come to wreck and ruin will be more than restored. It's why the Apostles' Creed ends on such an expectant note that we believe *in the resurrection of the body and life everlasting. Amen.*

How can I say this with confidence? Because in several of my many visits at the hospital and nursing home we spoke frankly about such, and as our trust and friendship grew, Gray spoke of his mistakes, his excesses, his regrets, his sins of commission and omission, of often putting fun and pleasure before faith and the church. "I didn't show up as often as I needed to," were his own words, and I believe he meant them. How easily that happens, especially when people think you're such fun and when life is good and prosperous for decades in the construction business and when weekends are for the beach and a boat and big tug at the other end of a salt water rig. Gray was grateful for decades of sobriety and the new chance it gave him with his girls and Cheryl. When I assured him that he belonged to Christ, he smiled, and when I prayed and read Scripture he always said *Amen.*

That he welcomed two son in laws, Paul and Beau, into his hunting and fishing is something Liz and Mimi are grateful for. Also the example of their mother who kept her vows *in sickness and in health*, a vow that sounds so noble on a wedding day but in this case was proved over thirty-five years of Crone's disease and multiple surgeries and moving him from facility to facility for his care. I often found her or Rink or one of the girls there when I visited, loving him as best they could and monitoring his care. And then Wednesday evening just after six, his troubles and pains whittled him down to nothing, and he left them in the great mystery of death. He was with them, and then there was one less person in the room; he was gone. I arrived after all but Cecil had left, and there he lay, pale and still, and no matter how often I've seen it, the contrast still sobers me. There is a body and someone indwelling it, and then- in a last breath- they're gone. One day it will be you, and one day me, and the challenge of facing death today is to receive again the call that life is precious and every moment counts, so get about

² For a full treatment of two-stage post-mortem existence (i.e. heaven, then resurrection and new creation), see N.T. Wright, *Surprised By Hope* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2008).

the business of seeking Jesus and learning to love his God and others with all you are or may become.

To listen to the stories of Gray and Cheryl's friends is to howl with laughter at how this man brought mirth to their lives, as when he used to dress up in a Santa suit and sneak around the windows of the Munnerlyn home to give the boys a peak of just who'd visit them in a few nights, or the time he showed up dressed like a woman and no one recognized him. As a man of discretion, Ed agrees that some of the stories will only be retold in the smaller circles of the original co-conspirators. Or how about all the tales of being lost at sea with Gray and of an engine fire that scared them all. 911 calls to shore rescue were considered a customary expense for this slightly-zany seafaring family. It was Gilligan's island Greenwood style!

Liz particularly remembers the times when as a young girl her father took her aboard for a voyage out to the Gulf Stream and treated her like a crew member of the great ship *Sea Turkey*. Mimi remembers a flight in a small plane and a barn of sleek Arabians which no one rode and everyone admired. Gray remembers them being *an animal family*, how her father supported her passion which has now developed into a doggie-day-care in Charleston. All three remember how he welcomed their friends and made a place for them in outings and adventures on the farm. Little Gray also delights in the memory that her dad once let her skip school for the first day of deer season, as my father said, *Education is what you have left after you forgot everything you learned in school*. No all learning is in a classroom with four walls, and living with their dad was always an education. They will learn over time what to forgive and release and what to keep and treasure, as we all must with the mixed legacies of our parents. All three girls remember times at the barn where food and fun and friends all mixed together in a sense of togetherness which is so important to children; to have your parents' friends treat you like one of their own is a blessing.

Now because our situation as fallen human beings is so gnarled and complex, so is God's process of untangling the knots and rebuilding us. Forgiveness is primary, and how far God is willing to go to make that plain is displayed in the cross of Jesus which is, as the Bible teaches, for "the sins of the whole world" (1 Jn. 2:2). God's love comes near enough to suffer with us and beyond that to exhaust all the worst we can do to Jesus and one another. Easter is God's remind that we do not every have the last word. All who humble themselves and ask for forgiveness receive it, and with it an invitation to walk through life with a new friend whose four biographies begin the New Testament. Imagine something as large as that. Because the Creator who made us gave us bodies, physical healing is also an avenue God uses, but the mystery of why some and not others

is always with us. The doctors are God's friends, but often there is grace beyond such natural means. Gray suffered long with many ailments, but even with his trials he was with us seventy-one years and by God's kindness died in peace Wednesday evening, surrounded by family and friends, cared for with the skills of medicine and compassion at Hospice, and upheld by the prayers of the church. The last words I read him that afternoon were from Psalm 121. As I marked the cross on his forehead I read, "The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and for evermore." This is now the second funeral I've done for this family. On March 6, 2011 I buried Cheryl's mother Bertie Beattie at St. Luke in Hartsville, so some of the faces here today are familiar.

I know this family is grateful for the support they've received. For doctors and nurses and therapists and care-givers who joined them in keeping Gray with us as long as they did. For friends who drew near with promises of prayer and today with tears and hugs. For Fred Alewine who always included Gray in his route of care till he just couldn't do it anymore. To have a church to come home to is also a great gift. Here it's not fee-for-services, not just another commodity; here it's free grace and the open arms of God and a place to come home to and be reminded that all are called to follow Jesus amidst all his other rag-tag disciples. Today you entrust a man you loved to the kindness and mercy of Almighty God who cared for him across a lifetime in ways we do not know. Today you will make decisions about what to do with this great Christian faith and the grace of God offered you today. Today is a turning point, one that will soon be marked by a gravestone and the dates of birth and death. You will visit there with flowers, and there you will laugh and cry and pray.

As an ending I want to tell you why I chose this gospel story, the one about the paralyzed man let down through the roof by his friends. It's because here I find several connections with Gray. First are his family and friends who cared enough to carry him for help. Had you not tended him, he would not have lived as long as he did. Secondly, that his greatest need, as with us all, is to hear Jesus say what he said to the cripple, "Man, your sins are forgiven for you." I reminded Gray of that regularly. And finally, that Jesus went a step further and healed him. For Gray that was not in this life as we hoped. Only in the last few days did I begin to pray for a good death. He is now pain free and full of life. But the final restoration, for him and us, remains future. Our destiny is not as disembodied souls in heaven but as re-embodied people made fit for a whole new world. That is where all creation is headed, and I trust you are making necessary preparations. If you seek Jesus Christ, he will find you, and all will be well. That is his promise, and he is utterly trustworthy. Look what he did for us sinners. God sent the Son for us all. All are called to follow him in the fellowship of his church.
