

**A Witness to the Christian Gospel  
at the Death of Jule Kelly Canaday  
Psalm 32:6-11, 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:21  
October 6, 2014  
Pastor Phil Thrailkill, Main Street UMC**

**T**he rich and full life of our sister in Christ Jule Canaday came to an end Wednesday afternoon when her cramped lungs could no longer support and deliver oxygen to her heart. Her family and doctors saw the end coming, but there was a toughness and resilience in Jule that defied such predictions. Until just several months ago she was able to stretch herself as tall as she was able and, with De as her support, make her way to worship. I remember one particular Sunday glancing to my left as they entered, De in a dapper sport coat and Jule in a stylish dress. With every step she leaned on him, so difficult had become the complex mechanics of walking and catching her breath. My heart was stabbed by the beauty of it, of a man and his beloved leaning on each other and leaning deeply into their common faith in the God who embraced our world in Jesus Christ. As the vows declare, “to love and to cherish until we are parted by death,” and that is why we are here this morning. To remember Jule, to sketch out a few of her characteristics, and to set her life within the larger context of a sturdy Christian faith that shaped her all her days. My wife Lori, a close observer of details, said they looked like two sides of one heart when hobbling forward for communion, as if life had fitted their infirmities into a sturdier whole to keep them upright. In a good marriage the two become one in so many ways.

I last saw Jule Monday afternoon at the nursing center. She was a petit woman made even more so by the bending of her delicate frame. She looked so small there in the bed, and I had to lean down to hear her speak. As always, her legendary humor was present as De said Jule accused him of being absolutely useless as an attendant because of his inability to keep all the growing array of items in the right containers so there could be proper order and not chaos in the space she now occupied. I think *fastidious* is the word her family uses. Life was to be orderly. On Tuesday I returned, but she was at a medical appointment. On Wednesday she had a hair appointment, received a visit and a prayer from Carolyn Thomes, and was then- a few hours later- found unresponsive and taken to the hospital. When I received a call that evening and went to the small room at the ER, there was son Bill, C.J. and Vera, and there lay Jule still and quiet with good hair!

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I don't mind people using the more delicate and less brutal phrase *passed on* because it invokes the metaphor of life as a journey and raises the question, *Passed on to what?* But I still think we need the word *die* to mark the difference at life's outer edge and the biblical word *heaven* to mark the destination, not just a vague reference to *passing on to a better place*. Jule died and found herself in heaven, freed from a twisted frame and into a realm of love for which we have only glimpses in this life. I stood at her head and read Psalm 91, and when I came to the last three verses substituted *she* for *he* to apply the promise to her.

“Because she cleaves to me in love, I will deliver her;  
 I will protect her because she knows my name.  
 When she calls to me, I will answer her;  
 I will be with her in trouble,  
 I will rescue her and honor her.  
 With long life I will satisfy her,  
 and show her my salvation” (vv.14-16).

I then laid my hand on her cool brow and prayed. I remember the first time I performed such a pastoral ritual and how I trembled as I crossed some kind of invisible line to lay my hand upon their brow and pray. As many times as I've stood with the dead, I'm always surprised at the contrast between the person I knew and the current reality. The body looks the same, but something is missing. The person, the vitality, the soul or spirit is now absent. The body has become deflated, the person absent. A division has come between soul and body; the chord that bound the two parts so closely together since conception has been cut by death. One part of the person is preserved, the other part reverently dealt with and buried. This was Paul's view of the binary nature of the human person when he wrote, “So we are always of good courage; we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:6).

The body is a house, and like a house it eventually crumbles. But not so with a person who is linked by faith and love with the Lord Jesus, because in their case another process is also at work, again as Paul wrote, “Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day. For this slight, momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (2 Cor. 5:16b-17). Medicine chronicles with great accuracy the wasting away of human nature in all its biological details, and at death its great work of

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preservation and pain relief is over. But that is not the end of the faithful person, because all along a divine energy has been at work, nurturing and renewing each day the link that will carry the soul beyond death and into the light of Jesus Christ, there to rest and delight and await the great resurrection of the dead when the whole of creation shall be reclaimed and healed and set free with the body of our risen Lord as its first example and prototype.

To hear the story of how De and Jule met while on a college missions program of the Methodist Church is to appreciate the weavings of divine providence and how, perhaps, we have lost some of the necessary supportive structures that let young men and women of a common faith find one another and eventually marry. Both had Methodist pastors in their history, and I chuckled at the reverse of chivalry when at their first meeting at a team picnic Jule offered a shivering De her Clemson jacket to keep him warm. And they did keep each other warm for decades, and in a way perhaps only marriage can, shaped each other in ways that were good for them and overflowed to the world around them.

There's was a union grounded in a common, sturdy Christian faith that helped them, with C.J. and Vera and others in South Carolina, to help lead the church beyond its inherited racial prejudices in the days when such was not easy. We're still working on these issues, but we would not have made the progress we have without pastors and wives who were liberal in the best sense of the word and who dared to believe that the spiritual and intellectual resources of the Christian faith were sufficient to help us face and dismantle an evil system of prejudice in which we were all implicated. The issues have now shifted, and the lines are not so clear as they were then, but work remains for those who see beyond insulated spirituality to the common good. To confess the Christian Creed of the Triune God and then not to find some place near the front lines of moral endeavor is a major disconnect because in every generation the social capital we inherit from our forebears is not sufficient but must be replenished with fresh efforts, and that Jule did as part of a larger dream of racial and social justice.

Mission, this deep impulse that knowing God must make a difference in the world, was a theme of their lives. Shared ministry in the church with all the old expectations for a pastor's wife, that was Jule's lot. Bill remembers his mother filling up her car with church ladies on a hot summer day in the early 1960's to drive them down where the pavement stopped in Cayce and the dirt roads began to acquaint them

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with the poverty and lack of plumbing at their doorsteps. And here was a woman, who after a conference with the Methodist mystic and teacher Frank Laubach, helped form the Columbia Literacy Council to teach adults how to read. That some of her fellow citizens were denied this basic skill was an injustice to be addressed one student at a time, sitting down at a table with a primer to open a fellow citizen in a poor section of town to a whole new world. A college educated woman teaching adults their ABC's and how syllables formed words and sentences and whole thoughts. One teaching another, handing them a key to unlock new worlds.

Isn't that an image worth holding in your mind? People who can read can read the Scriptures. People who can read can read the newspaper and books and find themselves in a much larger world of understanding and culture and informed involvement as citizens. To read and write are such basic skills, but some, like Jule and her circle of concern, must go back to remediate those the schools or circumstances left behind. Jesus was taught to read, how else could he have read from the Hebrew scrolls in the Nazareth synagogue? And if her Lord had this skill, then so should all his children.

But we must never allow good works to be separated from their roots lest they become cut flowers that soon wither. Christian social action is not a thing in itself to be separated and thus secularized. It is grounded in the love of God and in the life of the church, and that is its true motivating power, that we work not alone but hand in hand with the God who gives us motive and perseverance and who comes near enough in Jesus Christ to claim and honor the whole of life. And guess what? Adults who can read and write begin to value education and make sure their children and grandchildren value the same, and so there is a redemption and lift that has generational effects. Jule and her co-belligerents set something in motion by reclaiming lost adults that echoes still. Might there not be a pastor or teacher or doctor out there somewhere whose grandmother was taught to read late in life? The good we do out of love has effects far beyond our knowing, and now Jule sees that her contact with Laubach and the years of effort that followed were part of her calling. Bill and Cherry have a candle to keep lit and a legacy to enter into. It is a good thing to find your own way, but a better thing still not to forget where you came from and the faith and faithfulness preserved by others for your sake. We honor our fathers and mothers by sifting their legacy with both forgiveness and appreciation, then by guarding the good and keeping it alive. And in this God is our helper.

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To sit around a table with this extended web of nieces and nephews and to hear their tales of Aunt Jule was a treat. Because it is my privilege to convene such meetings, I listen for themes as the stories unfold, and one of the topics that came up over and over was Jule's extraordinary ability to say much without saying anything at all. Her voice was soft so people had to listen, but it was her eyes that were her greatest tool of influence. The way they lit up with humor at a pun or an understated joke, the way they rolled ever so slightly to indicate approval or its opposite, and the fire of defiance that occasionally flashed. She was legendary for her attention to detail, to her appearance, for her thrift, and for her ability to keep her husband's sometime indulgences in reasonable check.

I am told De inherited some Charleston silver that stood as a reminder of the splendor of an old world, and how Jule hung over the silver chest a biblical portrait of the rich, young ruler as a moral caution. And then, in the early 1970's, Bill saw how clever his mother was, when after De purchased an expensive new tonal arm for an already elaborate stereo system, Juel removed the rich young ruler from over the silver chest and without a word mounted it over the stereo system! Such a man could not go to far wrong with such a pious and clever wife who cared for his character and conscience with such care. Quiet were her words, and great her influence.

Something deeply good happens to people who keep practicing the disciplines of the Christian faith. Worship, study, prayer, giving, confession, community, serving where sent, fidelity, justice, service. It takes time, and they are shaped to see life, its duties and opportunities, through a different set of lenses. They live before others but under the eye of One, and no matter what life brings, they have hidden resources in a relationship with the Living God to whom they bring the whole of lie.

Where do such people as Juel come from? Able to make a difference and to endure the frailty of a twisted frame with its increasing limits? I will tell you. Because someone early on told them about the God who made them in his image and who came to the rescue in Jesus Christ, who loves them every day and who calls them beyond the circle of the self to a life of exploration and of service. Heaven, and after that the kingdom of God, is not a reward in the sense of something added on as a artificial motivator. It is the trajectory of a human life set in the right direction. Where else could she go? She belonged to Jesus Christ, a price paid for long ago on a hill outside Jerusalem and with the benefits offered to her in Christian baptism.

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It wasn't that far a walk for Jule late Wednesday afternoon. Her frailty embraced in his strength, her sins covered by his mercy, her last breath near and her hair freshly coifed! Jule walked over a bridge just beyond sight and found herself at home, a place she had longed for and for which the sweetest and best of this life was only preview. And if that sounds sappy and overdone, then you simply do not understand the love God has for those who've said a long Yes to Jesus the Son. They are precious to him.

There are not many ways. There are many people, but there is only one way home, and with help of Jesus Christ and his people the church, you can find the path if you've never walked it, or- if you have drifted- find your way back. Let your obituary be more than a litany of jobs and clubs and honors because all of that will be left behind as prologue.

God's hand is extended to you today in the life and memory of his daughter Jule. How would your life be different if you knew the same Savior she did? Do not ignore the pressure and call of God's grace that is on you this moment. Consider your mortality and humble yourself before Jesus Christ.

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