

**A Witness To The Christian Faith
at the death of Mrs. Margaret Corley
Monday, July 30, 2012, 11:00am
Pastor Phil Thrailkill
Mark 4:35-41**

There are several women in my life to whom I pay very close attention, not because I always like what they say but because they are the pastoral equivalent of early warning radar. They see things I do not see and offer wise counsel about what I should be doing. When I obey, things go well; and when I don't, well- there's lots of apologies and back-tracking to do. The first of these is my wife Lori, and the second is whoever the church secretary happens to be, in this case Emmie Burns, who as soon as I arrived in the fair village of Greenwood only a month ago announced, "One of your first visits needs to be Margaret Corley at NHC. She is such a colorful figure!"

And, when I inquired as to the lilt in her voice at the word *colorful*, several stories poured forth, from Margaret once being about the best looking and best dressed woman in Greenwood, to her uncanny ability to lay a cussin' on whoever made her mad, to the changes in her appearance in these later years, and to her development of a strong hoarding habit that greatly pleased the auctioneers in our area who would call Howard with a question, "What are you going to do with all this stuff your momma bought?" Emmie ended our briefing with a word of warning, "Now if she gets mad and says some bad words, she really doesn't mean it. She's just had a lot of troubles lately. After all, she is a member of our church." How southern is that? And how kind?

My visit was more than pleasant. It was touching. I squatted beside her bed that same afternoon and roused her from sleep with the words, "I'm Pastor Phil, the new guy at Main Street; Emmie said you had to be one of my first visits." It took her about half a minute to get oriented, but when she saw my collar reached deep and turned it on. Margaret Corley was now *in session*. I commented on the bling she was wearing, mentioned Howard- that he was my next visit- and asked her about the green Minnie Pearl straw hat on the bedside. No bad words from her, or from me! I could tell- just by being that close- that this woman was a force of nature. And when I offered to pray, she eagerly took my hand and sort of nestled down into her pillow and closed her eyes. I prayed God would be kind to her, and when the prayer was

over gave her my best words of encouragement, “Margaret, remember that you belong to Jesus Christ and you belong to us at Main Street. You are not forgotten.” She smiled, and I left- having promised to make another visit soon. That promise is fulfilled this morning at her graveside.

There are around 70,000 residents of Greenwood County, and- by Howard’s best estimate- upwards of 40,000 know his mother because of her combination of a wide and diverse circle of friends, her frequenting of all the local watering holes where she would often leave a tab in Howard’s name, and her several brushes with the law, one of which led to a ninety day stint in the jail at age 85! Driving without a license was not an oversight with Margaret but a settled habit of character. I suspect they were more than happy to have her leave their facility!

I wish you could have been with us last night when Howard and his wife Glenda, his boys Jason and Joseph, and his daughter Jessica regaled me for nearly an hour with one story after another- most of them edited for pastoral consumption! And while there was noticeable pain in the room over a woman who could neither be reasoned with nor managed, there was no bitterness, just gales of laughter at a woman who did just as she pleased without regard for consequences! We could not stand many such persons, and Jim Carey’s character in the movie *Liar, Liar* comes to mind. They make us laugh because there is something utterly childlike and frank about them, a quality Jesus often lifted up.

There were times when Harold put her on a long cruise with her big, black, bodyguard Ronnie Smith just to let someone else watch over her for a while. Then came the notice from Carnival Cruises that she was now banned from their boats! Yet, it was Glenda’s testimony that no matter how testy Margaret was, how foolish or embarrassing her decisions, Howard always treated her with courtesy and patience. You see, friends, he remembered that when his father died early on it was momma who sacrificed for him and Ivan. She provided all she could in hard times to give them a good start, including a few of the extras, and it was both his duty under God and his privilege to repay the kindness.

The three grandkids agreed that when Margaret was on site and in session, there was never a dull moment, a cross between Auntie Mame and Bonnie Barrow of Bonnie and Clyde legend. She once escaped from NHC by noting the habit of the staff and cutting off her motion sensor with a stolen pair of fingernail clippers!

How's that for Mafia operations at the old folks home. And- when apprehended on the way to her old residence, she replied, "They will not catch me next time!"

Jason spoke of her love of travel and of being a party girl always on the look for places where the laughter was unguarded and the dance songs unending. And her favorite companions, Ronnie the huge bodyguard and Mae the housekeeper, should be given some kind of award for helping her manage her impulses and the piles upon piles of treasures and junk that grew up around her like lush kudzu. Who knows why? Was it Depression memories? Or just a change of brain chemistry later in life?

Joseph just could not quit smiling, and every tale led to another. When Jessica said grandmother was the best storyteller ever, all nodded. One of her favorite pastimes was to remind the children she had Mafia connections who were always watching out for her. Margaret was an unguided missile whose guidance system was never quite calibrated. That she lasted into her 90's is a tribute to her guarding angel- who may have been the busiest in recent history- and to all the people who knew her well enough to make allowance for her eccentricities, peculiarities, and whatever other term you coin for a woman who was *one-of-a-kind*.

So why have I chosen the story of Jesus stilling the storm as our focus text for this morning? Because there are some storms only Jesus can calm, and Margaret Corley was one of those who threatened to swamp whatever boat she boarded. There were times in this family, no doubt, when Howard and the kid's prayers may have been very close to that of the disciples, "Teacher, do you not care if we perish?" Well on Saturday, Jesus finally said to the storm that was Margaret, "Peace! Be still!" and Margaret breathed her last, leaving behind of wake of joy and chaos that finds few equals. The question for the family is now, "What will you do with the calm?"

What most touched me in my time together with her family was the sheer terror and wonder this woman kindled in others, and if those who love her can sift her life- leaving the dark material and keeping the good- then her life will remain a source of joy and laughter for decades to come.

So what do we do with our friend and sister in Christ Margaret Corley? What the church has always done. We commend her soul to God, her body to the ground, and her future to the Jesus who loved and guarded her in ways we will never understand. We are not her judges. We are those she leaves behind to make of this

life the best we can. And I suspect that those who love and follow the Lord will see her again at the great resurrection of the dead at the end of the age, only now with all the dents hammered out, all the broken places healed, all the pain only memory, all the sins forgiven, and I dread having to hear her say to me, “Dammit, Preacher, you never got back to see me before I died!” It’s OK, Margaret. We did a good job at the graveside.

Jessica said her grandmother’s favorite passage was 2 Timothy 4:7-8, and while her reading may not quite be what Paul had in mind, here it is:

“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.”

Thank God for the life of Margaret Corley, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, her God and ours. We will never see the likes of her again. Amen and Amen.