

A Witness to the Christian Gospel At the Death of Nancy Hall
Romans 14:1-12, 15:1-6
Pastor Phil Thrailkill, Main Street UMC

It was several weeks ago that I received a phone call from Jeanie Patterson. By the tone of her voice I knew she was upset and on the verge of tears. When I said, “How can I help?” a story unfolded, a story of her friend Nancy who was now at Self with a brain tumor, and- as she said- things did not look good at all. She reminded me Nancy’s husband Gary often attended one of our Sunday School classes, so there was a link and a bit of history. Underneath her natural concerns for the family that arose out of their friendship was Jeanie’s deeper concern that Nancy did not have a pastor because she had been disconnected from her church for several decades.

I run across these situations often. It’s easy to become disconnected and then- after a time of neglect- not know quite how to return. Perhaps there was a tiff or an insult, a mis-communication or lack of social courtesy, an anxiety-producing incident, or maybe something as simple as other attractive options on weekends till the habit grew thin and life was swallowed by family and friends and work and duties. A rich social circle is a good thing, but it is no substitute for the deeper fellowship of the church over time. It happens to us all: Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and the best thing to do is just go see the person for an initial visit, which I soon did. It’s one of the ways you serve as a pastor, by taking peoples’ concerns seriously and learning to read between the lines to the deeper issues. The idea of people nearing the end of life without someone to pray for them and remind them of Christ’s love bothers pastors, and it bothered Jeanie too, enough to call and give me an assignment! I’m glad to be the pastor of a church where people make such calls and give me open doors through which to walk as an official representative of Christ and his church. Like it or not, clergy- by virtue of our office of trust- are official representatives, and if you take it seriously, good things happen. People know when the end is near, when life is about to change forever. People know when their lifestyle and habits have contributed to their illness, and what they need is grace and forgiveness and a laugh and an I.V. of encouragement and a reminder that the love of Jesus Christ is indeed stronger than all that afflicts us.

As always, I prayed on the elevator on the way up to the room, not knowing what I would find once I opened the door. My last prayer is always is always a John the Baptist cry in the wilderness, “Here we go, Lord; it would be of great help if you go before me and prepare the way.” My collar and clergy badge would get me in the door;

but the rest would depend on the Holy Spirit and keeping my wits about me.

Upon entering I saw a frail and thin Nancy in bed, hooked up to lines and machines, met her daughter Courtney and husband Gary and also a friend from the VFW. What do you do next? Well, if you are a South Carolina boy from Cheraw and the sick lady is from Mullins, you try to make connections, the emotional logic being *that if some of my people know some of your people*, we can probably do some business together, which we did with amazing rapidity.

“Mullins,” I said, “by any chance did you know my uncles T.B. and Bascom Lewis or their children?” and that started it. Nancy’s eyes brightened, and we soon found so many connections I ended up saying, “If we keep this up, we may end up kin and have to like each other.” Everyone laughed, and I was now inside the circle, which I where you want to be as a pastor. To some such conversations and southern small talk may seem shallow, but to those of us who do this for a living, it’s gold. Because once the bridge is built, traffic moves in both directions. People sell you a significant slice of their story, and you respond to the gift they offer. Going on house calls with my Doctor Dad as a child introduced me to the subtlety of this art of listening and diagnosis, and it has served me well. I did not know in those I was being trained for this holy work.

After we connected to the amazement of all in the room, I asked a simple question, “What do the doctors say?” to which her straight and unvarnished answer was, “I have a brain tumor, but they don’t know where it came from. We’ll know in a few days.” My first thought was, “I bet she’s a smoker, because when you are born in Mullins in 1944, smoking is nearly a patriotic duty and was once- not so long ago- a sure token of *female cool*, and when mixed with the *beer-and-shag* culture of Ocean Drive, you can pick up some bad habits early on, even if you are a local beauty queen.

I was amazed how quickly and how frankly Nancy addressed these issues on her own without my prompting, while Courtney and Gary looked at each other and nodded with a smile. It is, my friends, a bitter thing to admit in public and before those you love most in this world that your weaknesses and frailties and history and habits, and yes- addictions- are about to take you from your family earlier than planned. How sad. To me that counts as a confession of sin, and so when I prayed a few minutes later I included a petition and reminder of the Lord’s forgiveness for all us sinners.

Things were going well. The Spirit had prepared the way, and we hit pay dirt early

on. Not all are that way, but this one was, and- frankly- I enjoyed it. It was real and humorous and honest and frank and I could see how Gary and Courtney loved this woman who, I am old, has six hundred pairs of earrings and enough shoes to fill a barn. When the Bob Ellis fancy women's shoe store in Charleston got word of Nancy's demise, I'm told she went into a day of public mourning over the loss of revenue. Gary's truce was that such expenses were just part of what came with marrying the *bling-queen* of Mullins.

Every life matters. Every story is worth listening to. No one ought to die in a hospital without someone to pray for them before their life ends, which is one reason we all ought to be proud of the Self Hospital with its firm commitment not to cut the chaplain's training program as so many have done. You are a better town and they are a better hospital because of this faith-based Christian commitment. I visit the hospital several times a week, but they are there all the time, not high-tech but high-touch and high-listening and high-prayer and care. Why? Because there is a time and place when all of the best of medicine comes to an end. So go by the chaplain's office some time and speak to Steve and Cindy and the rest of the team, whose work is most often hidden and quiet. Ask them to come speak in your church, because room by room and case by case and crisis by crisis they are bearing witness to God's love and care at life's most painful and disorienting times.

I'm sorry I will not get to speak to Nancy again till I meet her at my own death or at the Lord's sudden return. We could have been friends and even shagged together at a party to beach music, because that is what we do in South Carolina. We wave our hands to *Hey, Hey Baby* and we ask, *Where do you go to church?* Would her life have been better without the smokes and the booze? Yes it would. Would her faith have been stronger if more Sundays found her in the pew? Yes, it would have. But, as Paul remind us, "Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before her own master than she stands or falls? Will her husband and daughter and grandkids have to forgive her for leaving too soon? Yes, they will. But when I prayed with Nancy and her family around that hospital bed, I sensed in her humility and honesty and self-effacing laughter a trust in a God who looked beyond her flaws and saw her need, and in the end that is how he sees us all, as needy, as broken, as frail, as people in desperate need of a love strong enough to embrace us in our dying days and carry us home. That is the kind of Savior I need, and his name is Jesus, and to him we commit this family and the dear and quirky one who showered them with her lavish, lavish, love. Amen.
