

A Witness to the Gospel at the Death of Norma Hines
Mark 5:21-43
Pastor Phil Thrailkill, Main Street UMC

Norma Hines is a member of an elite southern women's sorority after which a play and movie have been named. *Steel Magnolias*. Gracious and kind on the outside, sweet smelling, but with an inner toughness that can take and deal with life as it comes, especially the difficult parts, like living with myelofibrosis which was slowly turning her marrow into bone and depriving her of blood and all its benefits.

It was in 2000 that she was told her lifespan was five to seven years, and here it is fifteen years later. With the help of Dr. Mark Robirds and the specialized team at M.D. Anderson, and with the help of Sonny who accompanied her and cheered for her in all their flights and drives to Houston, Norma *the steel magnolia* beat the projection by more than a factor of two. And when it was clear, just two weeks ago, that having to be transfused every five days just to stay alive was not something she wanted, Norma decided it was time to shift her strategy.

She did not want to die because there were so many things she loved: her family, Donna and Donny her children, her bridge club, Rebecca and her family, the Republican Women of Greenwood, all her friends from the years at Greenwood Mills, her home and its familiarity, and particularly her church. Just recently she told Donna, "Please don't tell me I can't go to church." But with her low white count and history of infections, it just couldn't be. How many can and don't, but Norma wanted to and couldn't. How important it was for her to be found among God's people on the Lord's Day.

Working to get back *one more time* was part of her plan. Getting home one more time. Going to church one more time. Playing bridge one more time. Because when you are nearing the end of life, *one more time* is a great victory. To reach deep, to strive, to pray and plan for *one more time* is a witness to the preciousness and goodness of this life, which grows all the more dear and sweet when the days are numbered. So we took the church to Norma in home and hospital visits, in calls at Wesley Commons, and finally at Hospice House.

Now because I visited Norma often the last week of her life, I observed how

quick was her decline, but when lifeblood is no more, what else is there? About a week before she died I entered her room and Self and asked— as I often do— What are the doctor’s saying? She smiled, “They say I’m going to die.” Well, that was Norma, straight and honest. She then said, “Pastor Phil, don’t worry about me. I’m going to die the same way I lived, with faith in the Lord,” and she meant it. It was her confession of faith.

You see, Norma had deep roots in the faith. Her uncle Bill Kinnett and his son Mac are my colleagues in the South Carolina Annual Conference. I’m told that when younger, Norma taught herself the organ so she could play the hymns for Orville UMC. Now Christ is willing to receive whoever comes to him, however late in life that may be, but it is a good thing to— like Norma— have a long and deep heritage of faith which seeps in the cracks and crevices of your soul so that it becomes second nature and shapes your live all along the way.

It was that faith in God and the courage and spunk it gave her that let Norma head off to Washington as a young woman to take a job with the FBI and then, upon returning home, enroll in the Atlanta IBM program and become the first female systems engineer at Greenwood Mills. She was a Christian feminist before we knew what to call it! You see, if you believe God made you and that life is full of opportunities, you take risks, and when troubles come, as in a divorce and a deadly disease, you just don’t quit. Faith and perseverance are twins, and that is what made Norma a *steel magnolia*.

Now because the doctors know precisely what it means for blood to slowly run out, Dr. Todd was able— to the family’s comfort— to predict what the stages would be till the end came. The wise use of medicines kept her comfortable, and she was well cared for by the staff and the love of her friends and family. One afternoon I found her alert and laughing with her bridge buddies, the next day weaker, and the next day unresponsive.

On Saturday afternoon we gathered in room 103 for a final service of holy communion, and I tell you it is a solemn thing to read scripture, confess our sins, and received the token of Christ’s life around the death bed of a loved one. Medicine is high-tech, but this was high-touch, human, and simple, and ancient. It has an emotional weight and a depth of meaning that goes beyond words because it is such a powerful reminder of just how much we are loved and how Jesus Christ has

promised to meet us at death and care for us beyond it all the way until the coming of God's kingdom to earth and the resurrection of the dead. I marked the sign of the cross on her brow and committed her last day and hours to our Lord. And then, when I said, "Norma, this is Pastor Phil," she mumbled and gave us a big nod. She could not receive the sacrament, but she heard every word. To die in comfort and safety, surrounded by family and the rites of the church is a good thing, perhaps as good as is possible on this earth.

Sunday afternoon I had a wedding at 5:00pm followed by several meetings that ended around 8:30. As I walked out, the thought came to mind, "Why not go pray with Norma one more time? It will probably be the last time you see her." As I walked in her room, she was alone, but with some beautiful music playing. Breathing was labored. I put my hand on her bruised arm. "Lord Jesus," I said, "grant to your daughter Norma a good death, and receive her into your kingdom. Amen." When I follow my hunches, I do much better than when I ignore them.

When medicine has done all that it can do, the church has some words to say no one else can say, and that is that this life, as good and as troubled and as sweet and difficult as it can be, is not the end, and that life eternal— first in heaven and then back here with a resurrection body like that of Jesus when the kingdom comes— is our promise from God as demonstrated in Jesus Christ.

As I prepared for this service I decided not to read one of the standard passages used often at funerals but to read two of the miracle stories— the raising of Lazarus' daughter and the woman with the hemorrhage— which in Mark are woven together to demonstrate that Jesus has power over both disease and death. And if ever there was a steel magnolia in the gospels, it's this unnamed woman. Mark goes to great lengths to describe her difficult medical history which would have given her some of the same symptoms Norma endured. Low hemoglobin. An openness to infection. Twelve years of declining health and hope until one day she heard some village gossip about a man named Jesus who was building quite a reputation as a healer. But since her condition officially isolated her from church and society, what was she to do? She came up with a steel magnolia plan. She would sneak up behind him and reach out in faith to touch him wherever she could. And when she did, something strange happened. She was healed.

But what the Lord gave Norma was not an instant remission but fifteen years

of being sustained and of being aware that God was extending her life until it was time to come home. She lived in dependence. But in her death he reached out to her, and she was healed by leaving her sick body aside for a season in heaven, there to await the great events of the end. And every time she came to church, and in every secret prayer and act of giving and kindness, her faith in him was evident. And as for the second story, I apply it to Norma this way. The same Jesus who sustained her in life and healed her in death has another gift on the way. And that is to be called back into the fullness of embodied life at the glorious return of Jesus Christ, accompanied as it will be by the resurrection of the dead.

There's more ahead for Norma, just as there is for us on our pilgrimage through this life towards the fullness of God's kingdom. I hope that today your faith and trust and hope are rightly placed in the only one who is finally trustworthy and who has the wisdom and power to carry you through this life, and I hope that you may learn— if you do not already— to love Jesus' church as much as Norma did and to take your place on Sunday's in one of its pews. It will shape how you live and how you die more than anything else, and if there is something in Norma's life you admire, know that this is where it came from. From her Lord and his people.
