

A Witness to the Christian Gospel at the Death of Randy Wolfe

John 21:15-25

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What can be said of our friend and brother Randy Wolfe but that God graced him with a long and a good, a faithful and a fruitful life; he was blessed to have been born on Mother's Day and to have taken his last breath on Independence Day. The proverbial themes of mom, apple pie, and Yankee-Doodle-Dandy were woven into his life from early on. He was a faithful servant and head usher at the Wesley Methodist Church in D.C. for forty years and once, soon after the war, attended Easter mass at the Vatican under Pope Pius XII with a Catholic friend when all was still in Latin. I knew him only in the last two years as an older Christian gentleman who was full of stories yet always seemed to deflect the attention away from himself to his family, and particularly his grandchildren. Randy was easy to be around, and one of his most enduring qualities, often spoken of by his family and observed by me as well, was his ability to make room for other people and their peculiarities without any hint of judgment. His was an American life, and so in several months he will be interred in Arlington beside Camille. His was a Christian life, and so we are here today at Main Street to honor the God who walked with him all his days and who received him when his tired heart made it's last beat.

I've chosen a text from the last paragraph of John's Gospel because of two statements, the first of which is the risen Lord's prophetic words to Peter about the end of his life, "Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go."

I was delighted to sit down at Randy's home with Jane and Carol Monday afternoon to review our plans. There on the table was a stack of the smaller, sepia colored pictures from the 1930's, and one of them was of a boyhood clubhouse Randy and his friends built in the back yard of his home on 5th street in D.C. They and it looked just like a scene out of *The Little Rascals*. I kept looking for *Darla*, but she was not to be found. Randy's father was a pharmacist and had a shop in one of the downtown train stations, and so did Randy for a few years till he took a job with the GSA to free up more time for a growing family.

Perhaps it was there in Washington, the hub of the nation's life, with all the people coming and going in the station and with all the news of government goings on, and with all the monuments and museums and parades, that Randy was infused with a deep, deep

love of country. The food lines of the 1930's were not for him pictures in a book but scenes in the city where he lived. And on the hutch to our left was a dashing picture of a young B-26 Marauder pilot with his hat at a jaunty angle, and beside it a picture of Camille in the uniform of an Army nurse. A young man and woman who met, not at a USO dance in America but in occupied Germany. The next two paragraphs are pulled from Camille's eulogy a year and a half ago:

"I've done enough funerals, especially of World War II era folk, that I've learned some of the questions to ask, the best of which is perhaps, Do you know how your parents met? And this is a really good one. When the war in Europe ended in May 1945, Randy- a B-26 Marauder pilot- shifted to Transportation Command, and as a junior officer in Frankfurt took his turn for a month running the *O-club*, and what is a party without someone to dance with?

At Randy's request the base colonel called the hospital colonel to send over some nurses. This was nearly seventy years ago before the advances of modern feminism, and requisitioning what was needed was standard protocol. But there was a logistics problem. The bus was broken, so -as a man of ingenuity- Randy sent over a weapons carrier as limo service. They met at the party and reconnected in the States for a marriage. So if any asked, "How did you and Camille meet?" Randy- a gentleman in every regard- could say with a smile, "I requisitioned her from supply and unloaded her off a weapon's carrier. She then joined my crew as Navigator and co-pilot."

From time to time I catch one of the old World War II movies on the Turner Classic channel. And in the future when I see young officers in the briefing room and then watch them climb aboard their bombers and crank the engines, I will think of Randy and Camille. I encourage you all to Google the B-26 Marauder and at a minimum to read the Wikipedia article on the plane Randy flew. There you may review a mission in May 1943 when eleven took off from England on an experimental low-level run over Holland and not a single B-26 returned because of anti-aircraft fire and the much-feared Folke-Wulf 190's. The reason Randy's missions were all medium altitude operations were because of that incident. So when you children and grans read his log book and note the altitudes you now know why. For him the modifications that made the plane more stable in landings were personal issues on which his life depended. In the immediate post-war Randy shifted to the more leisurely C-47 as he hauled brass and important civilian administrators around Europe and the Mediterranean. What an amazing adventure for a young man.

How could you not be a patriot growing up in Washington and then as a WWII bomber pilot who met his wife under such circumstances? Then to return to civilian life with a deep sense of integrity and gratitude. “Thank you, Lord, for letting us win back Europe, and thank you for bringing me home, and thank you for Camille and the children, and thank you for my Lord and my church.” Might not these have seen some of Randy’s prayers? So deep was Randy’s commitment to simple honest integrity that he would only use his government issued pen for official purposes. Any hints of corruption riled him all his life. Any hint of kickback were for him a form of treason. His children could not use that pen; it was government ink! And that is how Randy lived.

And what did a good Christian man do in those days after the war? Well, you served in the church and sat with your family after the offering was taken and your duties done. Without being asked, you did things like walk three or four blocks down the street to help older women get to church in the snow. You took care of details, like where the keys were to the church furnace room. You took your place in the Lion’s Club and other civic associations to sell brooms for the blind, and then later- when they moved to Greenwood- involved yourself as a school volunteer and at the food bank. You see, friends, if you once bought stock in the experiment that is America and offered our life to defend it against the evils of fascism, then when you come home you watch out for your investment. It’s *your country* and *your government* and you watch out for your posting on the front, wherever that is. When enough people think and act that way, out of a potent sense of both gratitude and duty, it has both a preserving and stabilizing effect far beyond their efforts, and when they don’t it all starts to crumble around the edges and lose strength at the center. It is a ballast in every neighborhood and every office that keeps the ship more or less upright. And isn’t that what we’ve lost? A sense of civic virtue, a vision of a common good that needs all our contributions, that life is more about giving than taking? There may have been a few secret places where Randy had to choose to do the right thing when he was tempted with the wrong, as we all do, but what a remarkably consistent life of family and country and faith and fidelity and service and love and honor. May his tribe increase.

In my last four or five visits to Randy we spoke frankly of his decline and coming death. Less wind, more fatigue, more time spent in a chair, less ability to come and go, sometimes a sense of boredom and feeling useless. He was winding down and needed the care of others more than ever in his life. One day, as I sat beside him back in his study he said, “Pastor Phil, I’m ready to die. Can’t do much anymore. Feel like a burden. Why is the Lord leaving me around?”

“Well, Randy,” I said, drawing on some his military history, “you haven’t been relieved of duty yet. You’re still under current orders to love God with all you are and your

neighbor as yourself. Good soldiers don't just leave their post."

He knew I had him and smiled. I then took his hand and prayed. At my last visit Jane was there and something really funny happened, but I will leave that to her retelling.

One of Randy's delights in the last few years was to learn some of the new-fangled technology to keep up with his scattered grandkids. Late at night would find him reviewing their Facebook posts and pictures, and since his death his grans Kelly and Kim and David and Sara have honored him with tributes as the best, and perhaps the coolest, man they've ever known. They will never forget his *greatest generations* toasts at weddings or the way he loved their grandmother. And perhaps, if they hold his memory dear, it will help them to live with some of the deep virtues that grew out of the rich soil of his faith in Christ. Randy knew what it was to be young, and he knew what it was to be ninety-three years old. In the words of Jesus to Peter, he knew what it was to make his way in life, and he knew what it was to be so weak you had be carried around and tended to. That he died at home, at peace, with a daughter to encourage him and with the love of you all, was a good end to a good life. So the question for this extended family is this: now that the patriarch and matriarch are gone, now that the center of your family is empty, how will you stay in touch and love one another. Who is now the glue? Who will tell the stories?

I learned just this week that no one knew the full extent of the decorations he wore on his uniform, but isn't that like many of his peers? Part of something larger, more about *we* than about *me*. And now that Randy is part of something much, much larger, that company across the ages to which the Apostles' Creed refers to as *the communion of the saints*, can't you see Randy shaking hands with Pius XII and saying, "Hey, I saw you in Rome in '46! Didn't understand a word, but it sure was impressive!" You think I'm kidding? I am not. A trust in God through Jesus Christ is beyond the limits of this life a ticket into a world more marvelous than we can dream. And when held dearly and deeply in this life, and when nurtured through weekly worship and daily devotion, it has the power to shape our lives against the grain of this confused world in ways that leave a legacy. John was right when he ended his biography, "But there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written." Well, Randy was a page in the Lord's book, and in his life are written many of the good things we need to guard and pass on, and if that sounds a bit corny and old-fashioned, so be it. Ponder this life; measure it against your own, and may it stir in you a curiosity and desire to know the Lord who stamped this man so clearly. Maybe then, at the end of you life, there will be something to say beyond where you went to school and where you worked. Are you living for only this life, or the next one as well?
