

A Witness to the Christian Gospel at the Death of Ruth Medley
Isaiah 25:6-9, 2 Cor. 4:16-18
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Death is a separation on several levels, of the soul from the body and the self from the visible human community. On Monday past, after a short but intense battle with an infection that would not yield to the most potent antibiotics, our sister Ruth Medley experienced this involuntary separation. Ruth died. Her chair and place at the table are now empty. I'd visited her the three previous days, read Scripture, prayed with her and had a good conversation with Susan, James' wife, to discover her love of horses and her work in a rural valley of Virginia as an EMT. Hearing about their children helped make sense of several photographs I'd seen on the mantle in the Medley home. When they lived in Cheraw in the late 60's and early 70's James was a year behind me and Don a year ahead with John already away at Wofford. When I met them again my earlier memories were recalled that James was serious and bright and that Don loved cars, as witnessed by his new Hemi Charger with the great exhaust sounds; I'm almost frightened to ask for a ride in such a powerful machine. James and I laughed on Wednesday about an chemistry teacher we shared; Don was one surprised to hear that my mother's uncle built the Rockingham Speedway. This family is especially grateful to Don for his residential care of their parents and to John for taking his father to a VA appointment in Augusta immediately after Ruth's death.

My visits always had the same form. I'd knock on the door and receive a shout, "Come on in, Preacher." I'd find them seated in recliners to my left and right; to watch them struggle if they had to get up made me appreciate that life had become frail for both. Frozen legs from World War II and osteoporosis take a toll on height and mobility as you approach ninety. I'd ask a few questions, then listed as Jim told some great stories. Ruth had heard them all and never interrupted! A great wife! Jim kindly remembered that my father was the last doc to make a house call in their home.

Today I want to publicly express my gratitude to Ruth and Jim and link them to two particular incidents. It may have been my first home visit in July of 2012 when- after a few courtesies- Ruth piped up in a quiet voice, "Pastor Phil, I have something to show you." Ruth grew up in Saluda and in school was a year behind my uncle Bill and two years ahead of my father. She reached into a magazine rack and pulled out a paperback 1942 Saluda Tigers Annual with a page folded down. There was my dad as a ninth grader and captain of the football team. I never knew that fact and teared up a bit to my own embarrassment. I love it when I find a missing piece

of the puzzle, and Ruth helped me do that. I'm also grateful to her as a pastor's wife who moved often and who supported Jim, sometimes at high cost to her and the boys.

When Rev. Medley came to Cheraw the schools were under orders to integrate, and it was Jim and a number of other community leaders who formed a Human Relations Council to help us all bridge the gap and divide of fear. And it worked. There were no ugly incidents as in other parts of the state, and it was in part due to Jim's forthrightness and sensitivity to the complex issues of race that got us through. A parallel body of black and white students was formed at Cheraw High, and I was one of them. I never knew until coming to Greenwood that I owed that to Jim, thus a second piece of the puzzle. In visits to the Medley home I recovered parts of my own life, and I was made aware again of how important it is to carry our convictions about human dignity into the public square. Every time I meet with Jim he speaks with gratitude of a Methodist Church that helped arrange his adoption as an infant, received him when he left Southern Baptist ranks over conscience, and supported racial healing in the name the Lord of the church. That Jim had a week with Dr. Martin Luther King in a 1957 seminar at Southern Seminary changed his life as it opened some doors and closed others. Jim and his family paid a price for their progressive convictions, and had Ruth not done her quiet part at home with the boys, Jim could not have done his public role. That my home town was prevented from becoming a byword of shame I will always be grateful for.

There are some things that need saying again and again. As many times as I've been at the bedsides of the dying and the dead, the difference always calls me up short. They are with us as a person, a unity of body and soul, of flesh and personality, then comes a separation and a stillness as the body fails one last time. The awful finality of death is again up us. We read Psalm 23; we touch the dead in respect; we thank God for their life, and we entrust them to a risen Jesus who conquered death and whose strong arms await them just beyond their last breath. Ruth, as a daughter of God, has been folded into the richness of the communion of the saints. She is full of peace and joy and understands both her life and ours through the wise love of our great God as she awaits the descent of the kingdom of God and the resurrection of the dead. These boys have never known life without her; neither have the grans or great grans. But now you do, and it is difficult. Jim lost his sweetheart, and you have lost a mother. As I left the home on Wednesday, Jim smiled and said, "She was a pretty young thing." You should see her now, and one day we will if we walk with the same Lord who sustained her all her days. Jesus is worth following in his frail, broken, wonderful church. He is our friend; he understands and asks for our trust this day.
