

A Witness to the Christian Gospel at the Death of Sonny Hines

Mark 8:27-9:8

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My load is lightened this afternoon by the abundance of participation and personal tribute from Sonny's niece and nephews. His niece Sunnie DeWorken's affection for her uncle is marked by the fact that she and her husband John broke off their honeymoon in the Far East to fly home for this unexpected funeral. Sonny's sister Rebecca Sherrill told me with moist eyes what a good man and great brother he was, especially in the days leading up to and following her former husband Bob's death in 1999. In her own words, "He hovered near us, and often sat me down just to talk through the pain." And when I quipped, "Like a helicopter," she smiled and added, "Over the years he put up a lot with me!" the details of which will be kept for family gatherings. In the past year Rebecca and Sonny formed a new visitation team for our Main Street Care Team, making home visits to check on the homebound and to remind them they belong to Christ and belong to us. I'm told Sonny loved this form of ministry, and that he was a natural in someone's living room or over a glass of iced tea.

Sonny and I spent a lot of time together the last three weeks, and all of it at Self Hospital as he went through the delicate and often maddening process of getting blood thinners adjusted so that he could then be sustained at home and at the right therapeutic levels with pills. Too thin and you bleed internally, too thick and you clot. How hard is the work of even the best physicians and all their helpers who draw blood and hang IV's. It was a deadly balancing act he finally lost Tuesday evening, only a bit over an hour after my last visit and prayer together. All the best of emergency procedures and technology was brought to bear when he was found crumpled, and it was not enough.

I will not say, because I am not Presbyterian, that it was *his time to die* as if was inscribed on some eternal decree in heaven, but I will say that *it was the time he died* because of a host of complex factors, and when I heard the same at the office Tuesday morning, I was stunned. I must have visited him fifteen times during his hospitalization, and in that many contacts you build a relationship. I learned about his family, his time as a tanker in the Army, his late-in-life marriage to Norma, his step-children, his work in real estate, and his fierce Republican convictions. He was

always glad to see me, and I found out on Monday- the day before he died- that he trusted me when he shared a story he'd told no one else. And when, at the end of his telling I asked, "Sonny, if I should be the pastor to bury you, would you give me permission to share what you just shared with me?" he answered, "Yes, I'd like that."

Sometimes, when you've been doing this a while, you can sense dis-ease in someone's voice. And what I heard Monday afternoon was fear. There would be a needle puncture the next day to draw off fluids, but this was more than the pre-procedural jitters. He knew clots were killers and wondered if he'd ever be able to draw a deep breath again. So I asked, "Are you concerned you might not leave this place?" After a look of relief that I had named his fear out loud, we talked a bit about his anxiety and all he had left to accomplish in life. It was then that he paused and said, "Pastor Phil, I want to tell you a story I've never told anyone else." And when someone says that at a bedside, it's holy ground, and there's only one reply, "I'd love to hear it." And then you shut up, because one of the great privileges of this work is to hear some of the most amazing stories from people you find trustworthy on other grounds. And here's what he said:

"It must have been about twenty-five years ago because I was already married to Norma. That would make me about fifty-three at the time. It was a Saturday morning, and I woke up and just lay there because I knew something was different. Then I felt it, a warm sensation all over me. I had not prayed, just laying there. But there was this warmth of love all over me, and since I didn't know what to do, I got out of bed, went into the other room, and got on my knees. It was the love of God, Pastor, and it was all over me. Well, for about the next three days the most amazing thing happened. I loved everyone I saw and everyone one I met. I couldn't help it. I truly loved them and wanted the best for them. But then it faded, and I've always wondered if I responded properly and why it faded."

"Sonny," I responded after a long pause, "you did just the right thing. You humbled yourself on your knees and didn't resist, and then you let it flow through you to others as long as the intensity lasted. That's how it is with such divine visitations. You didn't control its coming, and you can't control its duration. Church history is full of such reports. You were visited without warning by the Holy Spirit who gave you the gift of a taste of divine love, the kind Jesus must have felt when he looked

at us grubby sinners. The fact you kept it a secret for so long is a sign how precious it was and how you thought others might not understand or think you were special or something. Such gifts are especially hard for men to talk about because they go so deep. That you now tell it to me with such feeling and detail is an indication how it's influenced you across the decades. This is the real deal, and thanks for sharing it with me."

"I've never thought about it that way," he smiled. "I thought I did something wrong to make it leave me."

"Not at all, Sonny; it's what pastors are for. We use the riches of the church's long reflection on such experiences to help you think about them. Across the years I've heard some amazing stories, and yours is near the top." I then asked permission to share the story should I be the one to bury him; I had no idea he'd die the next evening. But such is the providence of God who knows all the details about us, including the medical stability of clots and when one might break loose.

At each visit we prayed for healing and more time in this life, but it was not granted in the way we asked, and that is why we're here this afternoon. Sonny's final witness is that this great Christian faith is not just to be believed but to be experienced in the heart and in the mind and in a new capacity to see people with the eyes of Jesus that we may gain a glimpse of his passion and love even in this life. What visited Sonny a quarter century ago, the intensity of which was with him for three days before going underground like a deep artesian well, he now enjoys in a fullness that only increases, never wanes. We were made to be possessed by such love, and Sonny's prayer would be that today, even at his funeral, you would open your heart to ask for such an immersion in the holy love that made the universe, everyone in it, and that dwells in perfection among the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit because it is their life and our true home. I was touched to hear that Christmas Eve would often find Sunny on the tough side of town distributing Christmas trees and gifts to children who'd likely go without, a tradition begun by he and Rebecca's father and enlivened by his own encounter with God's love for him, for just for the world in general, but for people just like him, and like me, and like you.

At another visit I asked Sonny how his prayers were going.

"Knowing what to pray is sometimes hard, Preacher, but when I recite the Apostles' Creed I find great comfort."

In just a minute we will do that together. When life is shrinking down, and when you feel afraid, you do two things: you lean into what you know of God through

experience, and that Sonny did by recalling his mystical encounter with me, and you lean deeply into the faith of whole church as summarized in words you memorized by their repetition each Sunday. Not dead words, but living, a sure anchor for the soul. To trust what the church believes is faith.

When the polls had been consulted, Jesus asked his inner circle of friends and followers, “But who do you say that I am?” And Sonny answered in the words of the ancient creed, “You are the Christ.” I will miss him, and I know that many of you will miss him even more. But he’s fine and would not return to us if given the opportunity. We will go to him, but he will not come to us.

Today’s sermon is not so much mine but his to you. You know something about him in death that you did not know in life. And so some Saturday morning when you first awake, and before the challenges of the day rush in to fill your mind, maybe you should pray, “Lord, visit me with divine love that I may see how precious is every person and love those you love.” Then see what happens; the Lord may loan you his glasses for a day or two of new sight and change you forever.

This day remember several things: that you are mortal and will die not at a time of your choosing, that life is fragile and good and sweet, that tomorrow is not promised, that Jesus Christ wants a deep and lasting relationship with you and is arranging circumstances to gain your attention. Remember that the church is his place, and there is a place for you among his disciples who are learning the ways of love. Sonny, I think, would approve of what I’ve said.
