

A Witness to the Christian Gospel at the Death of Terry Kelly
Luke 10:25-42
Pastor Phil Thrailkill, Main Street UMC
September 9, 2014

We are here today at precisely 12:30pm to celebrate the life of *the late* Terry Kelly. Her family says she was late all her life, and it took her friends, and particularly her daughters in law, some time to admit she was not going to change. Here is a woman who refused to be rushed by any one else's sense of urgency. I'm told her bridge club once lied and told her the game would start half an hour early just to make sure she was on time, and that when she carried her boys to a Saturday movie they'd often arrive half way through the film, only to be consoled by their mother that they could stay and watch the first half of the next showing.

We are also here to remember the Lord and his church who nurtured her soul to a rich fullness over ninety-four years. Her grandson Wesley had what he took to be a revelatory dream just about the time she died shortly after 4:00am on Saturday. In that dream she came and spoke of his upcoming birthday. It was to say, "Though I am gone, you are not forgotten." Wesley's words to us as we sat around the table Sunday afternoon were these, "It was so real, it sort of scared me." Her son Jim also had a dream not long ago, a portent of sorts that her heavenly dwelling place was in its final round of preparations. While we do not take doctrine from them, they are too vivid to be ignored and are often a great comfort from God's kindness.

Because of her faith and faithfulness, Terry will carry influence for years to come. Her life continues in her legacy. She serves as a reference point for what it means to skillfully blend the love of God and the love of neighbor, to be Mary and Martha at the same time. And this is the function of saints, not stained glass caricatures, but real people with quirks of character and endearing oddities who loved God and everything God made, and that was Terry. We need such examples to imprint us all, and while we as Protestants do not keep a full lists of saint's days, for this family Terry's birthday and wedding anniversary and death date will serve as feast days. They will read the handwritten copies of her life memories and draw strength. They will sit around eating a slice of her chocolate cake and tell Terry stories; in that time the veil between this and the next world will grow thin as they laugh and cry and savor and are formed by a growing catalog of Nanda stories.

There are, I have observed, different kinds of grief. When death is sudden and

unprepared, the pain is like a deep cut and there is much unfinished business to be worked through; you often hear people say, “I wish I’d had a chance to say goodbye or that I loved them one more time.”

There is death from war, and death from accidents; the death of the young has a different quality than the deaths of the aged whose lives hang ripe and heavy with years and whose memories are full of long galleries which through their parents’ stories stretch back well over a hundred years. This is what the farms in Saluda and Newberry counties where Nanda grew up mean to these families. Her childhood recollection of her grandfather’s two government mules, Mary and Belle. Playing under an old house and having adventures in the woods with cousins. In the early 1920’s such rural homesteads had more kinship with the century that preceded them than the one they were less than a quarter of a century into. But the grief of this family today is the culmination of a loss of a mother and grandmother that occurred slowly over many years because of the creeping loss of cognitive capacity, a cruel disease that took her highest functions first, and then at the end the most basic of blood pressure and respiration. Terry slipped away from them not in one big event but in a thousand small steps as she slowly retreated into a smaller and smaller world of her own. And then, when a particular brain circuit deep down was interrupted like the shorting out of a wire, she finally quit breathing and passed from this life into a heaven that is just beyond sight where her mind was instantly restored and she saw it all, and I mean *it all*, with crystal clarity. Just what would it mean to see not only your own life but all that’s been in the full light of Jesus Christ? What an amazing experience awaits all who are his followers. Theirs has been a long, slow grief, and it was marked by what no one wanted to say out loud, “Lord, why is this taking so long?” Well, I guess because such goodness is hard to kill, and as long as Terry was alive she actively bore the image of God and lived on through the impressions she made on her children of several generations.

Unlike many women of the World War II generation Terry had the privilege of a college degree from Lander. And she used her liberal education to bring her own enlarged sense of the world to the honorable tasks of being a homemaker, a partner in the family business, and the chief promoter of fun and laughter wherever she went.

Long before such books were written, Terry had a clear sense of what it meant for a boy to be a boy, and how giving them freedom to explore within limits was perhaps the best way to prepare a boy to be a man. To hear John and Jim speak about the adventures of their boyhood on bikes exploring Greenville and going on city

safaris with their bb guns sounded to me like about as good as it gets. This was no over-protective mother but a woman who wanted her boys to flourish, and admittedly, the times were different. Perhaps theirs was the last generation of an All-American boyhood: Superman comic books, living outside in the summers, pick up games and tree houses, wooden swords, and adventures in the woods. It is time in our culture to re-ask the question, Where do good men come from? With a father who was a bomber pilot and a mom like Terry these boys had a running start.

There was a delightfully mischievous side to Mrs. Kelly, particularly when the grandkids came for a visit without moms and dads. It was a time with fewer rules and more adventure, like watching forbidden wrestling on TV, striking out on an unplanned adventure to upstate waterfalls, eating forbidden foods, playing war with plastic soldiers, and not keeping a regular bedtime. Really dangerous stuff! It is no accident but the direct influence of their grandmother that Jeremy and Patrick are landscape architects since the garden and flower beds in Nanda's back yard were so carefully tended, including saving seed from this year's flowers for the next year's planting. Using their father's old plastic blocks, the precursors of our Lego's, and her taking an interest in the cities they built led Patrick into urban design. Stories from her and Pop's travels to fifty states and all the national parks gave them a breadth of geography and appreciation for a life of larger possibilities.

I was fascinated to read of her early years on the farm, there to find she had vivid memories of two illustrated children's Bible story books, including the names of their compilers, Hurlbut and Egermeir. There were times she sat in her Father's lap as he read not just a story or two but the whole book at one sitting. John and Jim will decide what to do with those two well-worn volumes since they are a part of what she leaves behind. At an early age her mind was furnished with the stories of the Bible, so much so that she wrote, "We went to church because we all wanted to go..." This is why when the time came she and Pop were founding members of St. Matthew UMC in Greenville and why Terry taught 3rd and 4th grade Sunday school for four decades, forty years doing for other people's children what her parents did for her, passing on the faith and its habits. When the Good Samaritan is not just words on a page but woven into your life it shapes how you see the world. And this is why Terry was ahead of the curve on race relations, and why Jimmy remembers getting his mouth washed out with Ivory soap for letting a slur slip. "They are people just like we are and deserve respect," she said That Jimmy quoted her words verbatim and recalled the taste of the soap is testimony to her ethical effectiveness!

The task fell to John to compile a narrative summary of his mother's life, and to read the pages is to know what it means to fulfill the biblical command to honor father and mother. It reads like a modern paraphrase of Proverbs 31 so many were the excellencies recounted. Terry even made room for her daughter in law Nona, who to Terry seemed to have arrived from a foreign planet, tattoos and all!

Wesley and his two older brothers laughed at the recalling of *The Muffin Stories* which were tales Terry created about the adventures of her kitty *Muffin* who once even took a journey to outer space. Those who lived close to Terry were stamped deeply by her character, her faith, her endless love of fun, and her infectious engagement of all that was good and innocent and there for the discovery.

Cass recalled a precious moment when, before she and Jeremy married, they were at the mountain house. It was just the two of them, and Terry began to tell stories of her love for Mr. Kelly. Cass said, "She had this look in her eye, of such devotion, that it gave me hope I could have the same." What a gift to a young bride, in a cynical world to give her hope of a life-long love affair.

Amyloid plaque is the stuff of Alzheimers, and its march through the brain is a blight. I visited Mrs. Kelly at the memory unit at Wesley Commons, and I was impressed when I arrived at lunch to find a staff member feeding her patiently a spoonful at a time with no complaint. I'm glad her hard work and thrift provided the resources for such care. It was my privilege to visit her almost every day of her brief stay at Hospice and then to do our Methodist version of last rights: a Scripture, a prayer of release, and the sign of the cross on her forehead as a reminder of her baptism. We then waited, Kathy and others keeping vigil. To die in a beautiful place, in the faith, surrounded by family and a daughter in law singing you hymns and with the aid of medical care to keep the pain away is simply as good as it gets in this world. The disease was cruel, but God was kind. This family learned that worth is not measured in quality or productivity but in the whole of life which God gives from natural birth to natural death. We always bear God's image.

God gives us a wondrous creation, his own Son to reclaim us from sin and death, his Book to guide us, the sacraments to make faith tangible, and the church so no one needs to travel alone. God also gives us people who have walked with him so long that in their presence we sense something of his deeper reality, and everyone in this family knew her name was Terry. Love God, love neighbor, bend the rules a bit for the kids, show up for worship and show up for life. It's a good motto.
