Memorial Remarks for My Mother, Vivian Turnau (April 16, 1937-March 22, 1991)

Submitted by admin on Sun, 03/31/2019 - 23:58



First of all, we—my brother and his family, and me and my family—want to express our deep gratitude for all the love and care you have shown us over this past week. We're very touched. Honestly, it's been overwhelming to be on the receiving end of so much compassion, sympathy, and friendship: a fountain of grace. And because we see you all so rarely, the temptation for Carolyn and me is to spend quality time with each and every one of you until we collapse from exhaustion. Thanks also for folks like Tripp and Sally who have shielded us from that, giving us time to regroup and grieve alone. For all of the sensitivity you all have shown at this time, you have our thanks.

This outpouring of love and care doesn't surprise me, much, though. We've been through this once before when my Dad died, and Redeemer rallied around us and loved on us so much. This is just built into Redeemer (and Redeemer daughter churches') DNA. This is what the gospel looks like when one of us suffers. We love you all so much, and I hope someday we can pay you back even a little (though we understand the gospel's not about payback).

Thank-you also to all the friends and family who are not part of our church family but came to be part of this. Your presence is such a comfort in a hard time. We love you all.

I want to tell you a little about my mother as I knew her, about who she was, and who she had

become, and what she's like now.

My mother was not without her faults, as those who really knew her can attest. She could be very strong-willed when she felt a principle was at stake. She could be very direct in voicing her opinion (she was a New Yorker, after all). She could be demanding and pretty particular about how she wanted things to be. She tended to be a worrier.

But she was also full of kindness. If she saw you regularly in a store or at your job, she would ask after your family. If there was a need, she'd do a favor and give practical help. She opened her home, either for tea or a meal or for days if you needed a place to stay. If you were a Spanish speaker, she'd chat with you a bit in Spanish to make you feel at home. If there was trouble, she'd offer to pray and follow-up later to ask how you were. For my mother, there were no little people. In a world that has become increasingly impersonal, she was a humanizing influence.

When she saw a wounded soul, she would instinctively move in to try to heal. My mom called such hurting people "dear hearts," and I think there are some dear hearts here today (my wife is one).

She was a lifelong learner, and a lifelong teacher. She taught French and Spanish in high school. Lately, she had been teaching ESL students as a volunteer. She was tutoring a student the night before she died. She was teaching to the right to the end—the teacher's version of "dying with your boots on." It's not true that "those who can't do, teach." She could do, but she preferred to teach. She had teaching in her blood. Those of us who are related to Vivian by blood know: it is established Turnau lore that we will all become teachers. It is inescapable. It is our destiny.

My mother was a woman of prayer. She had a thick binder at home, an alphabetical list of all the people she knew who needed prayer and how she could pray. You wanted to be on that list. She would spend hour upon hour praying. In her later years, she'd say, "Well, I can't do much, but I can do this." This, above all, may turn out to be her life's greatest contribution.

Much of this you probably already knew. But I want to tell you also about who she became. In the last 3 or 4 years of her life, she was different. She was transformed. She became mellower. She stopped worrying (think about that for a moment: a lifelong worrier just…stops). When things didn't go her way, she was fine with it. She told me, "I just don't feel the need to control." In the place of worry and control, she became open, warm, content, patient, full of wonder and gratitude at…everything.

She used to not like animals or nature so much (she was, as I said, a New Yorker, a city girl). But when Ruth bought her a bird feeder two years ago, she just fell in love with watching the birds, naming their species from her little book. She even welcomed the squirrels…or laughed as Carolyn or I tried unsuccessfully to chase them away with a broom.

A few days before her death, she asked me to take out the recycling. The box in the hall had gotten too full and she couldn't handle it herself. "When you have time; I know you're busy," she said. And I said, "If I don't do it now, I'll forget." The task took me all of 10 seconds, but afterwards she stood there saying, "I'm just so grateful. Thank you. I'm so grateful that you are here." And I told her that I was grateful that we had the chance to spend time with her. All this, initiated by me taking out the recycling. She was just so full of gratitude for even the small things.

The last time we were in the States, a couple years ago, I remarked on this change in her. She said, "Well, it's not me. It's Christ in me. Chalk it up to prayer." It wasn't just about getting older and slowing down. This was a spiritual change. And it made her an absolute joy to be with. I was always quite fond of my mother, but this was a woman who was easy to be with (and my mother was not always easy to be with), always listening, a joy to spend time with. You hear the phrase "living your best life now." That's what occurred: my mother had (in my opinion) become the best version of herself, the one through which Christ shone most clearly. I was looking forward to having this Vivian around for another 5 or 10 years, though it turned out that God had other plans. I think he was making the final changes to her to prepare her for being in his presence. It's a shame for those of us who will miss her, but that's temporary. We'll be with her soon enough, enjoying the new creation with her. In the meantime, I hope as I age, I'll become more like her. May God give me that grace.

Let me close by giving some advice. A lot of folks simply don't know what to say to grieving people. I know, I've been in your shoes. With perspective, I can tell you what not to say. I really don't like the phrase, "She's in a better place." Technically, it's true. But it comes close to damning with faint praise. The beach at the Outer Banks is "a better place." For some, Disneyworld or Carowinds is "a better place." She's not there. She's in the arms of her King, enjoying his company. As much as she loved my dad, dad's going to have to wait his turn: Jesus gets first embrace. She is tasting the world made new, the world made right, in the presence of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, seeing her beloved God with eyes unclouded. This is not "a better place." It's the eternally awesome place, the only real home we've ever longed for. I know she is having the time of her life.

You know, this was not the first time my Mom had died. Back when my brother and I were in middle school, our family was enjoying dinner, and corn on the cob was on the menu. Her body decided that this would be a great time to develop a new, life-threatening allergy to corn. Her tongue swelled, and my dad threw her into the car and raced to a hospital 20 minutes away. She died along the way. They revived her at the hospital. And boy, was she pissed. She told us that she had been experiencing peace and love as she had never imagined, and then she was dragged back to a screaming headache from the epinephrine they had shot into her heart. She had always longed to return to that love, especially after my father passed in 1996. She has that now. Therefore, I don't think I'd want to recall her from there, as much as I miss her (I don't think I'd want to face the wrath of mom at being recalled…again!). Rather, I am grateful for where she is, for who she gets to be with, even as I have to get used to this huge, heavy, empty space left by her absence.

We're in the season of Lent, and for Protestants (some of them, anyway), it's a season where you give up something you're allowed to have, but you want to put your desires second and learn a little more about leaning on God…until Easter, that is, when you get it all back. I've thought repeatedly about losing my Mom, about how her death has become this huge, heavy boulder that I can't shift. And there's nothing I can do to bring her back. Nothing fixes this. Nothing fixes death…until the resurrection. Maybe we're called to live in Lent, in a life where things, and people, are taken from us so we learn to lean on God the more. But, damn, do I crave Easter. Pray for us that we fix our hopes on the One who beat death, the One who can make this right. And until then, Mom is safe and complete in his care.

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