

A Good Word for Ruth Patterson

March 24, 2009

A eulogy is literally a Good Word. Some Good Words are easier to write than others. This Good Word for Ruth Patterson has been a piece of cake to write. I will truly miss my visits with Ruth. I was literally on my way to see her yesterday when I got the call that Ruth had died Sunday afternoon. Ruth was one of my first pastoral care visits I made as the new pastor at Park Road Baptist Church. Ruth had been taken from Merrywood to the hospital and her former pastor, Allen Laymon, actually went with me to meet her. She was a delight from that very first moment on. She moved from the hospital to the care facility where she would spend the rest of her days in that bed – reading, knitting, talking, listening, ministering.

I don't know where to begin. I'll start with my own family and our relationship with Ruth. My sons and I often went together to visit Ruth. Once when they were young, maybe 6 and 4, and we got ready to leave, I asked Ruth if she would like for us to pray together. "Oh, yes, please do," she said. I asked my then 6 year old if he'd like to pray. And he did. That pleased Ruth so much and with each visit in the years since we relived that moment. She and my son exchanged notes of encouragement and remembrance every so often since then. But her favorite memory of those visits when my boys were much younger was one time, as we were beginning the process of leaving, the younger one said, "Now we can get our M&M's!" It brought Ruth complete joy to know that I had bribed the boys into coming to visit her – that if they were good and polite, they could have M&M's when they got to the car. She laughed and laughed at that – and never forgot it. I'm happy to say that they visited Ruth with me right after Christmas this year with no chocolate bribery needed. It is not surprising that Ruth made this connection with my children. She had a way with children and loved their stories. She taught children's Sunday

School for many years. She always loved the things children said, the way they saw the world, the way they responded to life.

Ruth was one amazing woman. Anytime I would visit with her, I would come back and report to our Wednesday night group that if they ever needed a word of encouragement – if they ever needed a pick-me-up - if they ever needed a bright spot in their day, that all they needed to do was to go see Ruth Patterson. Many folks spend their declining years complaining, griping, feeling sorry for themselves. It is easy to understand this. But not Ruth. She made of that hospital bed a home – it became her nest of well-being where within arms reach was her knitting, her reading, her Sunday School lesson, her tapes of our worship services, her remote control, her tissues, her Bible, and her cards from family and friends. And lining her window sill were pictures of those that she loved the most – her children, her husband, her grandchildren – all of her memories stashed on that window sill as bright reminders of a good life. And all of this seemed more than enough for Ruth. She may have saved her complaints for others, but I never heard them and I never met anyone who did. The phrase can be overused and thus become somewhat trite – but Ruth was truly an inspiration.

I was amazed that up until fairly recently, Ruth read her Sunday School lesson and then called her Sunday School teacher every Saturday to discuss the lesson. She was very much a part of that Sunday School class though she hadn't darkened the doors of the classroom in over 8 years. She read her church newsletter cover to cover each week. And with her knitting expertise, she contributed to the ministry of our Needlers group – one time a whole group of us went to her room and sat and knitted with her. It was a great day. She listened to every worship service on tape and when I'd visit, we'd often discuss the sermon. What tickled me the most about those sermons on tape or the printed copy of the sermon was that often she would pass them along to

the chaplain at her care facility and ask him to listen to or read them so that they could discuss together. That poor chaplain had to hear way too many of our sermons, but it pleased us the way Ruth stayed involved and connected with her church. In our 8 ½ years here, Ruth never was able to come to church, yet she was very much a part of our faith community. Amazingly, she was more involved and invested than some folks that actually make it through the doors.

I went to our pastoral care file and pulled Ruth's folder. In it was a letter that she had written to us on July 23, 2003. We were in the middle of a summer sermon series on the Lord's Prayer. At the time her care facility was named Wesley. Here's what her note said: "Dear Amy and Russ, I started saying the Lord's Prayer every day 2 ½ years ago when I entered Wesley. I also say 'Holy be thy name' instead of 'Hallowed be thy name.' Holy seemed closer to me. The sermons on the Lord's Prayer have meant a lot to me. Being at Wesley made me feel that I wasn't 'giving' until I read somewhere: answer with a pleasant voice, answer with hope in my voice, sunshine in my smile, be cheerful and full of laughter. It works and . . . it makes me feel better." She ended the letter by drawing a heart and signing her name. During that sermon series Sara Eggleston made a banner of the Lord's Prayer. In one of the newsletter articles, Russ mentioned how many stitches were in that banner – Sara has a computerized sewing machine that kept a stitch count. In our file on Ruth is this note: "Started February 2003. Finished June 2003. Dear Amy and Russ, Enjoyed knitting the 97,030 stitches in this afghan for you. With love, Ruth." I am sure with every stitch for us and for all who received the work of her hands, we were drenched in her prayers. And even last night that afghan covered the now almost teenaged boy that prayed at her bedside years ago.

Ruth's daughter in law said that someone once said of Ruth that she was a Yankee transplant who became a gracious Southern lady. It's hard to imagine that Ruth was ever anything but a gracious lady.

Why did I read the passage earlier about Jesus calling the first disciples? It had to do with their vocation. I learned yesterday from Ruth's son that Ruth loved fishing. Loved it. It didn't matter if the fish were biting, it didn't matter if she caught anything or not. She loved fishing. When they would vacation at the beach, Ruth made her way to the pier where she would plant herself for the day to fish. If anyone needed her or wanted her for anything, they knew where to find her. They were welcome there, but it was clear – Ruth was staying put in her fishing spot. And some years later when she and her husband joined a country club, he enjoyed the golfing and she enjoyed the fishing in the little ponds on the golf course. Perhaps all those years of sitting and being attentive to the moment – not preoccupied or bothered by whether she was reeling them in or not – prepared her for the last 8 years of her life. Lying in the bed – unable to move about and live life as she always had – surely she must have summoned up the patience and fortitude of her fishing days. For she was needed where she was. The nurses and aides, the chaplain and the doctors – they all needed her listening ear, her caring voice, her gracious smile, her loving prayers. She was counselor, mother, friend, and minister to many in that place. She was a trusted other that people could open up their lives to and not be judged – just cared for. Jesus said, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And Ruth did. Thanks be to God.