

A Good Word for Vonetta Abraham

I loved Vonetta Abraham, maybe more than any church member I've ever not known. Let me explain what I mean by that strange statement, and tell you why I offer it as a sincere compliment to the life she lived. Pastors have sometimes-strange relationships with their parishioners. Our lives intersect in odd ways – often we are just faces that meet each other through the air of a Sunday sanctuary, with a firm handshake or a warm hug at the door following worship. Too many times we only really meet people, sadly only hear their stories, get to know what really made them tick – after they are gone, and we meet with a family to prepare a eulogy. And sometimes we don't even see the flock to whom we are charged to care for, across the space of worship. Vonetta was one of those members.

Years ago she had been an every-Sunday attender. She was faithful to raise Sheila and David in the church. They were there every time the door was open. Sunday morning. Sunday night. Wednesday night. Revivals. Special activities. If it was going on at Park Road Baptist Church, there would have been some Abraham involved. Vonetta and Billie Earthman made all of the original costumes for Park Road's outdoor nativity pageant at Christmas. They prepared the scrim, that black screen that obscured the angels high above those frightful shepherds in that tradition which for 59 years was just known as "The Tableau." When Vonetta married a man outside of her religious tradition, she brought him to Park Road Baptist Church, and Bob Abraham, a Moslem, and Charlie Milford, a Baptist, became fast friends. Occasionally Bob would show up for worship, but more often than not his and the Baptist minister's relationship was nurtured as they shared laughter, and (if I knew Charlie Milford) probably a drink, somewhere beyond the walls of the church.

But things change, and I'm not sure that in our eleven years as the pastors of Vonetta's church that we've ever seen her in Sunday worship. Please hear no judgment in my words. I intend none at all. In the last few years we have loved to be greeted by her at a monthly luncheon for our senior adult group – because she always had a warm smile, a sincere word of warmth and joy for her pastors. And there was no doubt. We were her pastors. I loved Vonetta as much as any church member I've never really had a chance to get to know, because, strangely, I felt like I did know her. I can't explain this. But there was some connection. Some intangible sense that we were kindred spirits. And I have never minded being her pastor across a distance.

There was some spirit in Vonetta that attracted me, and I'm not the only one. She and Bob met on a double date – but they weren't dating each other! They sat at a table together, and apparently though Bob had brought another girl to that party, he had his eye on Vonetta. The next day he made a phone call and, as they say it... the rest is history! They shared the next 36 years of their history together. They brought two children into the world who will be their living legacy. And in the last 13 years, a grandson has been the light in gleam in her eye. She was Gramma to Nick, and he was her joy. In her last days, and in her last moments, they were there, all gathered together. I've never seen a more beautiful picture of family. Though those moments when Vonetta was slipping from this life to the next were difficult, she was where she wanted to be – in the hands of a wonderful medical system, within the loving touch of her family, and under the watchful eye of the Grace of God. Sheila and David, and all who cared so... *well done, good and faithful servants*. Well done.

Vonetta died at Carolina's Medical Center, and how appropriate – because she really had given her life there. After making a 99 on her final exam in nursing school she went to work in

the Charlotte Memorial Hospital and for the next 46 years an untold number of patients knew the love of God through her attentive eye and her careful skill. Nursing is ministry. Pure and simple, and Vonetta touched the lives of more people than we could count. Even after she retired, that desire to care for people took her around the world with the Red Cross as she lent her nursing skills to disaster relief efforts from Iowa to California to Guam. With another 10 years with the Red Cross, she put in 56 years of care giving. What an amazing gift to this world.

And it came natural to her, because Vonetta was a mother to so many. All of Shelia and David's friends just called her "mama." She loved and accepted them all. There was no condemnation in her attitude toward any. She never turned anyone away from her table. What a gift... and what an example. If the world would open its dinner table to one another as she did... it would be a different place, indeed. And anytime she was there, it was open... but she wasn't always there!

She did love to travel... Cancun, Australia, Europe, the Caribbean, South America, Thailand, Russia... and I asked Sheila if Vonetta traveled with tour groups... who planned these trips. And Sheila said, plan? Who planned? We'd just get there and do what we wanted! Free spirit... I love it. And in Germany, that free spirit led her across the East / West divide and back... and right into the arms of the KGB. Not many folks can claim to have been interrogated under a bare light bulb for 6 hours by the KGB, and then set free – but Vonetta loved to tell the story. And when she wasn't taking her chances with the KGB, you might have found her taking her chances at the penny slots in Vegas or Atlantic City. Yes, Sheila says, she loved to gamble a bit... always for fun.

There was a free spirit in Vonetta Abraham that was infectious. Everyone loved her. She cared. She shared. She served. She lived and loved. And in seeing a life that loved God with *heart, soul, mind and strength* – the pastor she loved, but never really knew, feels confident to say today we can celebrate her life – that continues even now, in our lives that she touched so lovingly, in the eternal heart of God.

For Vonetta Abraham... thanks be to God!

Matthew 8.5 *When he entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, appealing to him ⁶and saying, 'Lord, my servant is lying at home paralysed, in terrible distress.'* ⁷*And he said to him, 'I will come and cure him.'* ⁸*The centurion answered, 'Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed. ⁹For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, "Go", and he goes, and to another, "Come", and he comes, and to my slave, "Do this", and the slave does it.'* ¹⁰*When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, 'Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. ¹¹I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, ¹²while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'* ¹³*And to the centurion Jesus said, 'Go; let it be done for you according to your faith.' And the servant was healed in that hour.*

Vonetta:

story of healing

from east to west to eat with Abraham:

vonetta's table was open

marriage was open

mind was open to east and west...

quiet faith: Go... let it be done... and the servant was healed

