



A Good Word¹ for Bill Bryant
February 25, 2014

Ecclesiastes 3.1-8

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

Matthew 11.16-19

'But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market-places and calling to one another, "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn." For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon"; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!" Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.'

I don't know when I've ever been more surprised than I was when I walked in the church office last Friday morning. It wasn't just that Bill Bryant had died unexpectedly, or before his time - it's that Bill really was just so full of life. Wasn't he? How could he be gone!? The day before your 63rd birthday is too young to die, so it's a good thing Bill lived so much, every day!

When I asked people to tell me about Bill, smiles came to their faces and there were twinkles in their eyes, but every single person said something like, "Well, there's a lot to tell - but I don't know how much of it you can say in church!" There was a natural mischief in Bill's personality - Harriett has known it since he was just a child. He was mischievous, but affectionate, too. Harriett said he always wanted to sit in her lap as a little boy, and when he outgrew her lap he'd still come and sit real close. His mischief and his affectionate personality have played out through his adulthood. He always had a good word of greeting, a hug to share,² a story to tell -

¹ "Eulogy" means, literally, "good word." We believe everyone deserves a good word, and have come to appreciate the challenge and opportunity to share someone's life through a Eulogy.

² In her opening remarks, Amy said of Bill that he did not hug every time he saw her - he squeezed!

some taller than others. One friend used to tell him he could lie better than anyone he knew, and always with a straight face!

Bill was raised at Park Road Baptist Church, his dad having been a founding member (1950); his mother joined in 1957. He was raised with a large group of friends, among them Robert Livermon and Richard Archer, Cindy Earthman and Marguerite Dente, Jerry Lock and Anne Morris Hogshead, Jan Davidson and Hugh Ashcraft. When he was a teenager Bill and one of these accomplices put detergent in the decorative fountain at the church's entrance. I'm sure they were laughing as the fountain turned into a volcanic eruption of froth and bubbles. Maybe they weren't laughing so much when Reverend Milford called them to his office and sentenced them to several days of chores around the church. They were probably laughing even more, though, when they thought they had gotten away with their prank again. I'm pretty sure they weren't laughing at all when they sat in Charlie's office the second time around!

Just this morning I heard one about Bill and his friend Ken Spencer. Ken if you're here, I'm sorry if I'm "outing" you on this little episode. You can blame your compadre, Hugh Ashcraft! One of Bill's first cars was a 1956 Volkswagon bus. Before there was a Morrocroft Harris Teeter, the old Morrison farm was a favorite place for two teenage drivers to practice their skills. Bill and Ken chased each other for hours, playing "cat and mouse" through the woods, in and out of the trees, over the hills. And then came the development of the local golf courses, Carmel and Quail Hollow, one of which became the scene of a two local boys, driver and navigator, "playing through," if you will, in a VW bus! All the landscapes had been crafted, but there was no grass yet, when two intrepid teenagers decided to explore the new terrain. They were having ball, which was par for the course any time Bill was behind the wheel, and then he crested a hill and realized he had hooked his drive a little short and was heading steeply down into a sand trap - that was about two feet deep in water! Bill not only loved cars, he knew how to drive them, so they escaped the wrath

of a golf course manager that day only due to Bill Bryant's skill behind the wheel. Ken still can't believe Bill drove out of that mud hole!

Bill wasn't all play, though. His father taught him to work, starting as a young teenager, flipping burgers, preparing popcorn at the two drive-in theaters the Bryants owned in Rock Hill, but his real love was auto mechanics. He was good with his hands. He had an engineering mind, an ear for an engine's proper tuning, a feel for precision and timing. He got a lot of mechanical practice putting together Lionel train sets - he kept a whole "train city" at one of his houses - and he spent twenty years in the auto parts business, helping customers with their mechanical needs, and sharing his love of the American fascination with Road and Driver. The car was one of Bill's loves. The other was the beach.

The family went every summer for two weeks, and Bill was captivated by everything about the Grand Strand. The wind and the waves, the sand and the sea, the dames and the dance... everything about beach life suited him! After a college year Bill spent a whole summer, sharing a house at the beach with a handful of boys. Can you imagine what that place must have looked, and smelled like, after a whole summer! Harriet said Bill met a lot of girls that summer - and he had ulterior motives. He was so gregarious he often got an introduction to the girls' parents, who often, conveniently, unloaded all their leftover vacation food on Bill and his hungry friends, before they headed out of town. Did I tell you Bill Bryant was also smart!?

The beach - and its unmistakable music - got into Bill's blood, and it made him move. The Psalmist exhorts us: *Praise the Lord with the song and the dance...* (Psalm 96.1 and 149.3), and I have no doubt that dancing is really a spiritual gift. Bill has had the gift since he was a teenager. I just love to watch couples who can really dance - and Bill and Diane Barlett could dance! They were members of the "Society of Stranders," and they went at least four times a year. Bill walked on the beach for hours in the morning, looking for sharks' teeth... but mostly they went to dance. That's how they met almost seven years ago. Bill was working at Lynn's Shag Club. A neighbor

emailed me this morning to say, "I didn't know his last name, but Bill was always so friendly at the club. Everyone loved Bill." That night he wasn't working. He was sitting at the bar, and there was a game on the TV above. Diane sat down and asked about the score. Bill said he couldn't see the score. My hunch, Diane, is that he couldn't see the score because there was something else in his eye that night. How did the Platters say it? "...Smoke gets in your eyes!" They spent seven good years together, and Diane talked about his fun, loving, giving spirit. She said he'd walk into the club, and by the time he got to her across the room, he would have kissed 50 other women!

Bill Bryant was raised in the church. He cut his teeth here. He had a special relationship with his first pastor, Charlie Milford. For years he was in charge of putting the lights on the top of the almost-25-foot Chrismon tree. He loved our Christmas Tableau - setting up for it, putting on a shepherd's costume, an angel's robe - maybe that was Bill's way of telling the story. Otherwise, he didn't talk much about faith - but he spoke to me several times going out the door on a Sunday morning in a way that said to me he'd been listening, in a way that said he was a person who did think about his faith, quietly. Behind the friendly face, the outgoing personality, was a thoughtful mind about things that really matter.

But mostly, Bill Bryant danced. The episode from Matthew's gospel is an encounter between Jesus and the disciples of John. They are wondering who Jesus is. John has sent them to ask: "Are you the one?" And Jesus just says, "Tell John what you have seen... what you have experienced about me." Religion is an interesting thing, isn't it? Jesus had an unconventional way about it. John didn't eat and drink. Jesus was accused of being a glutton and a drunk, and he hung out with questionable people. I think Jesus and Bill would have gotten along just fine. (Some Baptist ministers wouldn't dare tell about one of their members meeting someone at a bar! And, dancing...!?) But Jesus says you can always tell the ones who know who he is. When the children play the flute in the market place, most people just walk by. But there are a few who are able to

really hear the music, and when they do, they just can't help it - they dance! Jesus was saying that the Kingdom has come. It's already all around us. God is always with us. If you want to know who has experienced it... look for the ones who are dancing.

Yesterday, today, forever... Bill Bryant will be dancing.

Thanks be to God!