

A Good Word for Jean Gialenios
March 6, 2012
Proverbs 31.10-31; Matthew 7.24-27

Blessed are the pure in heart; for they shall see God. (Matthew 5.8)

Barbara Mandrell was famous for singing, “I was country, when country wasn’t cool,” and I can’t get that line out of my head when thinking about Jean Gialenios, because there is something in the spirit of that line that is true to who Jean was. You see, Jean was green before composting was PC. She believed in equal rights before ERA became a movement. And her sons say, always with a glint in their eye, she was a “bleeding heart liberal” before it was all the rage.

Well, it may not be all the rage, still, but if Jean was any indication of what it means, it should be! The dictionary will tell you that a bleeding heart liberal is “a person who is considered excessively sympathetic toward those who claim to be underprivileged or exploited.” I’m not sure how that can be a bad thing – and though Jean may have stood on the opposite side of the partisan divide from some in her family, you hear none of the disrespect which is so common in today’s political discourse when they talk of her. Some might have thought she stood on the wrong side of the aisle, but they all knew she was on the right side (let me say the correct side!) of integrity and compassion, of character and values.¹ Rachel had it right to recall the words of Proverbs when she thought of her “Granny”: “*Her children rise up and call her blessed... Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised!*”

It’s not often that you can get a crowd together hear the kind of uniform praise that Amy and I heard spoken yesterday of Jean. Three sons, three daughters-in-law, and three

¹ As Jean’s three sons told me about their mother, they frequently mentioned politics – and always with a smile! Apparently this was a family issue, and it seems like one which they enjoyed in a good-natured way, i.e., discussing/arguing about politics, but without any major family feuds (as good political discussions, and all family conversations should be!)

grandchildren told us of a woman who sounded a bit like a mythological creature, a legend of love and lore – but I never got the feeling that anything they said was anything but genuine and true! “What was she like as a mother-in-law?” I asked, and Susan said, “She wasn’t a mother-in-law. She was a mother. We were just her daughters.” Wow. Wouldn’t you like to bottle that! There are probably some daughters-in-law who’d be willing to pay for that potion! “What one word best describes her?” Amy asked. And we heard “mother.” And “wonderful.” And “independent.” And “private.” We heard love, in many forms, offered from those who knew Jean Gialenios best. We heard integrity in those descriptions because she was true to who she was.

Jean loved to garden. You can tell something about the heart of a person who loves to garden. There is a tender streak. A nurturing center. A consistency and a tenacity that perseveres, through fair weather and storm. And there’s a necessary toughness required – for pruning is part of the growing process – cutting away, disciplining. Amid the praise of three doting sons, Michael finally said, “OK... she wasn’t an angel!” There was the spoon and the spatula, the whatever-else-she-could-get-her-hands-on, maybe a metal-cleated baseball shoe.² You see, her boys soon out-grew her in size, so, yes, she knew how to tend and care and grow a garden, and she had a bleeding heart... but it didn’t stop her from getting their attention, by any means necessary. Like the time she put Michael out of the car, and drove off. (Yes, she did return!)

She loved to read. When I asked what she read, I knew what I would hear. “Mostly biography and history,” they said – just what I expected, of someone who loved to learn. Jean believed in education. She was the first from her immediate family to attend college, and she was sure to prepare her sons, too. I loved listening to them tell of their education. She made them

² Obviously an inside joke with these boys. (Jean apparently picked up a shoe one day and threw it at George before she realized the shoe was armed with metal spikes!)

study, but more importantly, she took them to the theatre. They were scrapping boys, but they were going to learn to appreciate a novel and a symphony, too. The most important education she gave them was just the opening of their minds beyond their own little world. Philip said when he got to college he was surprised to find so many students who had obviously not been exposed to the real world. Different people. Different cultures. Different religions. Different world views. Different sexual orientations. Different. Yes, she taught them... “Same Kind of Different As Me.”³ Maybe this comes from being raised in a small town, and then getting out to discover a world that looks pretty different from the corn field. Now there’s nothing wrong with small towns, and small town raising; a lot can be said for that experience. Jean Gialenios was just proof that small towns don’t have to limit your eyesight or your generosity or your spirit.

Somehow, she had gotten a big picture view of the world. That’s hard for some people to see from Eastover, SC, but she went to Furman University and was in awe. And from there, to the University of South Carolina where she met the man with whom she would leave her legacy. After those boys were well into school, Jean went back for a Master’s Degree, and after that degree she became a counselor, working with underprivileged and deprived children. But that didn’t last long. Her heart couldn’t take the pain she saw in children who were not being raised as all children should be. So she became a secretary. Imagine that, Jean Gialenios, a secretary! But it fit her to a “T.” She was organized to a fault, meticulous and precise. Precise enough to get a raise, and then a few more. And before you knew it, Jean Gialenios, who was raised in a corn field in a small town in South Carolina, was the Executive Director of Spirit Square in the big city of Charlotte, NC. She remained the Executive until Spirit Square was closed.

³ These are my words, not the sons, but they seemed appropriate. I am alluding to the book of the same title by Ron Hall and Denver Moore.

But when all is said and done, it will not be her Executive experience that her family and friends will remember. And it won't be her gardening or her love of education. It will be her heart they remember. When she was diagnosed with cancer, she wouldn't tell them. They essentially found out by accident. She didn't want them to have to care for her. That was her job. She had faithfully cared for her own mother, for years. Visiting. Nurturing. Loving an aging parent. And she had spent a lifetime caring for her sons. It wasn't supposed to be any other way.

I believe she learned her bleeding heart ways from the original bleeding heart. In that Sunday school class in that little South Carolina farm town she learned about Jesus. And while she was never pushy about her faith, it was the foundation of who she was. One of the daughters-in-law said, "Have you ever known that person who didn't talk about their faith, but just went around doing what Jesus did?" That was Jean. St. Francis had said, "Preach the gospel always... if necessary, use words," and words weren't often necessary with Jean Gialenios, because you could see the gospel in who she was. It was in her heart.

Park Road Baptist Church was essential to this family's formation. Michael remembers sitting at home on Sunday mornings watching Fred Kirby and The Little Rascals, and hoping his mother wouldn't wake up and make them go to church. But that day never came! Sunday mornings and evenings and Wednesdays and retreats and Sunday school parties and the Tableau... year after year. (Oh, she was every pastor's dream!) "Church was about getting a foundation," George said. "Then she left it up to us." Build the foundation. And then let go. What a great image of faith. And it is obvious that they learned well. When so many people die alone, Jean died with her family at her side. They had been there for a week. Sometimes there were six adults sleeping in that small ICU room. Children and grandchildren. A sister, a niece. The family

portraits she got for Christmas were always her favorite gift. When they gathered, she never wanted them to leave. This time, she didn't want to go. But she had cared for them, and it was their turn to care for her. And you did. Thank you. *Well done, good and faithful servant* (Matthew 25.23).

Independence. Creativity. Industry. Love of learning. Nurture. Care. Fair mindedness. Compassion. Selflessness. "*Her children rise up and call her blessed...*" If a bleeding heart liberal is what Jean Gialenios was, we need more of them. "*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*" She has – and through her, so have we!

For Jean Heape Gialenios. Thanks be to God!

Amen.