

Call to Worship
Amy Jacks Dean

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A Good Word for Pauline Grant
July 25, 2013

When you look up the word “formidable” in the dictionary, you’ll find a picture of Pauline Grant next to that entry. Linda Hefner, Pauline’s deacon, said it well, as Pauline *fought the good fight* for the last many months, “She is formidable.” You might also find Pauline’s shining face included with the entries for the words “strong,” “generous,” “faithful,” “insightful.” And maybe in a foot note for the word, “stubborn.” Pauline Grant was all of these. As we talked yesterday, three daughters in the room, two on the phone, these words came to mind as summaries of the woman who have loved and nurtured them, taught them to play the piano, and set an example of Christian character and virtue. Such compliments, coming from your children, come as high praise, indeed.

And when you open your Bible to the last chapter of that collection of Proverbs, you may see Pauline written all over the text. Some have downplayed these words, indicating a bit too much of a patriarchal flare – the praise of a wife indicating the all-importance of her husband – but let us not be too cynical. For the King to offer such praise of any woman is significant. This good wife, sounds a bit like Lady Wisdom herself, who is pictured as the first of God’s creations. As Pauline’s daughters told me about their mother, this text swelled to life.

Her husband trusts her... I thought of the business that appliance and furniture business that she helped Sanford run for so many years, a business which not only putt food on their table, but provided generous help for so many neighbors who could not pay a full price.

She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands... I had forgotten how extensive were Pauline’s accomplishments with a needle and thread. Quilts – she made five one year,

Christmas presents for her daughters. Pauline's fingers and keen eye put in intricate, precise stitches long before the day of computer-aided sewing machines. She made wedding dresses – her own and a handful of others, and bridesmaids dresses to go with them. Her fingers were perpetual motion, producing an endless array of goods and gifts: hats and scarves, bedroom shoes and blankets, toboggans and throws, prom dresses, recital dresses, winter coats, men's suits... and nearly 2,000 children's shirts made, single-handedly, in her work with a Presbyterian guild called the Sew 'N Sews. She even made a little lingerie for her girls, they said. Not the Victoria's Secret kind, of course, but this interest in sleep-wear apparently ended when one of the daughters opened a package – and the son-in-law offered a hearty thank you! Every year, the night before Easter, she was up, literally, all night, finishing the fifth of her girls' new Easter dresses. Each of those gifts stands as a testament to her industry, her creativity, her love for her family and for the needy.

She rises while it is still night and provides food for her household... I believe it was Sandra who said she remembers her dad's frequent words, "Pauline, you're working yourself to the bone... go to bed!" But, they say a mother's work is never done, and Pauline knew it well, and was happy to rise to the challenge. They were her girls; it was her home – and she was going to provide, even when her love of 53 married years was gone.

With the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard... Pauline loved her garden. When she wasn't holding a needle, there was a shovel in her hands, or clippers or pruners. And when the days of the vegetable patch were gone, she filled her sunroom with potted plants and beautiful hanging baskets. The green in her thumb was just another expression of her grace – she knew how to tend and till, to prune and prod and produce.

She girds herself with strength, and makes her arms strong... The title of Robert Harling's book, which became a blockbuster movie, sounds like the woman we all knew from Rowan County who graduated from high school when she was 15 years old and from Appalachian State, the first female Student Body President, when she was 19. The book is called *Steel Magnolias* – and that was Pauline Grant, wasn't it? Southern to the core. Genteel to a fault. Strong to her dying day. She raised five daughters, but don't think they were sitting at home knitting all day. They recounted a withering series of childhood accidents that befell them: in addition to the normal sniffles and scraped knees, there were broken bones, a dog attack, and the scare of rabies that followed, a bout with polio, a boating accident that left a daughter unable to walk, a broken neck, and a horse that fell on another. I'm not sure how the Grant Girls got them into such trouble, but Pauline was never phased. She was always the picture of calm, assuring in the face of any obstacle. Nancy is the only one who ever remembered seeing her mama cry. Pauline was ironing as she watched the funeral of John F. Kennedy. She explained to her young daughter the tragedy that had befallen this nation, and she cried. Daughter Sandra said of herself that she was weak as a child – but despite this, she always believed she could do anything. Her mama gave her that strength. "She believed in us," Sandra said, "which made us believe in ourselves!"

She opens her hand to the poor, and reaches out her hands to the needy... Pauline and Sanford Grant were pictures of Christian compassion as they ran a business; he apprenticed young men who needed a strong role model. I spoke with one of those men this morning, who says "they saved my life," taught me right from wrong. Not a day goes by that I don't thank God for them. Pauline and Sanford gave back, out of what had been hard-earned their store and with

her fingers; her needlework gifts hardly stopped with the family. She was caring and compassionate, and you could see it in the way she lived, in the faith she expressed in every way.

Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come... I love this phrase. When many are anxious about tomorrow, what may come... people of faith need not be alarmed. Pauline had that sure faith, a clarity of vision of that which is important; she did not concern herself with the anxieties of tomorrow. She knew, as Jesus said, “*tomorrow has enough worries of its own...*”

She opens her mouth with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue... Pauline loved children. They swarmed about her, magnetized by her charisma and her kind way. Someone has said that most of our theology gets taught to us in our music, and in this regard Pauline was a fine, committed theologian and teacher. She loved the music of the church and taught so many, children of all ages, to enjoy it. She made sure her own girls had piano lessons, and that each learned an instrument. Incredibly, all of the Cress children, raised by hard working parents, of very modest means, went to college – and Sanford and Pauline made the same commitment for their daughters, though Pauline never had to say a word about studying, or doing homework. One of them said yesterday they didn’t understand this – but I do. Actions speak louder than words, and when you’ve lived hard work and fidelity to your claims, you don’t have to talk much about it.

She was a teacher, but it was choral that was at the center of Pauline’s passion. For 35 years she directed the choir as she played the organ at Westover Hills Presbyterian church. She got amazing music out of that small, mostly untrained choir. She had only a small salary for those three and a half years, and she gave every dime of it back to the church. Music was her

gift, to the church and to its God. The daughters told me how she'd play with both hands and both feet, conduct with her head – and sing the tenor line to help that fledgling men's section! Amazing. All of it done with confidence and kindness – and to the end of teaching the love of God and the claims of the Christian faith. Those who have been her students through music and life are too many to count, and her wisdom continues to live in them.

Her children rise up to call her happy (blessed)... Amy and I have learned to love writing eulogies. Nothing morbid intended in that, but it is an honor to be charged with the privilege of stitching someone's life together in a succinct telling, to hear the stories and be entrusted to speak a good word for that life. When families gather to plan a service, they most often find it therapeutic, even enjoyable. Yesterday's certainly was that. As we sat together we laughed and were all amazed, again, when it became clear all she had done, which spoke of who she was. Though we grieve her loss, there is gratitude in our memories, the way each of us has been touched by her, and I know of no better affirmation that one has lived well than to have your own children *rise up to call you blessed*.

Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised... Pauline Grant did fear the Lord, and she is to be praised. I have known most of what I've just told you about her life, by spending time with her over the few years we had together, but I knew her mostly in the context of this church, which is to say I knew her because of her faith – and nothing different could be said of this aspect of her life. She was faithful. Steady. Steeled in conviction and commitment. True in her love of God through Jesus Christ.

Pauline and I had a wonderful relationship. I was her pastor – but she never gave me more credit than I was due – and no more authority than I had earned! Just because she was a

member of a Baptist church, she continued to remind me, did not mean she was Baptist! She was Presbyterian to the core. When I strayed from the straight and narrow of traditional teachings, she'd purse her lips in that little smirky grin I learned to love, and she'd set me straight. She didn't believe in the inclusive language we use at Park Road Baptist, and she never relented. "Man" means everybody! She didn't want to change the words of hymns or the lyrics of anthems, and doing so for some of those old classics was tantamount to blasphemy. She didn't care for our hymnal, nor for our commitment to find hymns that best support the theme of that day's worship. She could sing all of the best hymns by heart – and we ought to know that people learn through music. We needed to be giving them a foundation to stand on and a fountain to draw from in difficult times, and teaching them hymns, and singing them often enough that people could recall them from memory, could do just that. We never ceased sparring with one another. On my last visit, just over a week ago, she teased her about being a Baptist, which was an unfair jab since she couldn't give it back to me, but she grinned... and I knew what she was saying.

Give her a share of the fruit of her hands... I believe Pauline is enjoying the fruit of her hands through the living legacy she leaves in five wonderful daughters, and a world of students. *And let her works praise her in the city gates...* you see, I don't need to praise her, her work says it all.

And because of her Christian faith, we celebrate today, even through our tears. She is alive, in the eternal heart of God, forever, and in each of us, as long as we can tell her stories, call her name, live her commitment in our own. *A woman who fears the Lord is to be praised...*

For Pauline Grant, thanks be to God. Amen!

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