

Words for Irene Cole
October 11, 2003

Daughter. Sister. Wife. Mother. Grandmother. Friend. Child of God. That pretty much sums up Irene Cole – for she was always in relationship – giving of what she had and who she was. When Russ and I sat with her family to talk about this service and to talk about Irene, I found that we really didn't learn anything new – everything they said about her I already knew. (With the exception of what I learned from Elliott and Gretchen – Shopping! That woman did love to shop – everytime you went out with Maw Maw she wanted to know if she could buy you something. And being the respectful grandchildren that they are, of course they said, Yes Ma'm. What great memories. What great stuff. Treasure them all, Elliott and Gretchen and Addison.)

But other than what a shopper she was, I didn't really learn anything new about Irene. I already knew that she was selfless. I was already aware that she was strong. I already knew that she put others first – especially her family. I already knew that she practiced sacrifice and persistence. I already knew that she was one of those superwomen – who worked outside the home to help provide financially for the family while still being the hostess with the mostess/cook/maid/referee – all without complaint. I was already aware of the fact that even when she was tired or weary or in pain, she could find a way to summons a smile and say “it's gonna be alright.” If you knew Irene Cole then you already know all of this too.

Being the oldest daughter on the farm, she took care of the family – I picture a second mother of sorts. She had early training for what would in many ways be her life's work – taking care of family. Family ran deep for Irene – from siblings to husband to children (including in-laws!) and grandchildren – family was her life's work. She met

Richard in the Hickory Soda Shop – he was a jerk (a soda jerk that is). He met a young absolutely gorgeous woman and he won her heart with extra cherries and extra whipped cream on her sundaes. I did not know Richard and Irene before illness and pain crept into their lives, but one thing I do know in watching Irene over the last few years is that she understood her wedding vows. “In sickness and in health” we can say “Well done, good and faithful servant, Irene.” Would that we were all so faithful to our commitments.

But as Russ and I sat around Irene’s dining room table with Alan, Todd, and Renee – a phrase came to me. It comes from a book by the author Ferrol Sams. Sams is a physician from Georgia who is also a wonderful writer. And he was brought up by good ole country Baptist parents. The first page of one of his novels he talks about being Raised Right (capital R). As I watched and listened to Alan, Todd, and Renee, I was struck that they had been Raised Right. Richard and Irene have been in this church since almost the church’s beginning. Irene dragged the kids “kicking and screaming” to Sunday School (Alan’s words, not mine). She was determined they would have the spiritual grounding they needed and that is the basis on which Alan and Todd are raising their families today. And it was just a couple of years ago that Renee and I waded into those warm waters behind me in baptism. Indeed she Raised you all Right. She was proud of you all. She loved you all. You are the best product of her life’s work – so live well what she gave you. She gave you life, so live it abundantly.

Irene was faithful to this family of faith. She worked in the nursery. She taught Sunday School. And she loved to wear those angel wings in the Tableau. And she was a part of the heavenly host who actually had to wear the wings and not just stand in front of them. She was faithful in her attendance and support of us – even when she did not feel

like being here. It was her faith that sustained her. And that same faith is what sustains her even now.

“Irene was a realist who never gave up hope,” one of children said. And so it is today that Irene enjoys the Blessed Hope of the forever presence of God. She lived this life well. She lived this life with abundance. She lived this life with grace. She lived this life putting others before herself. She lived this life with persistence. She lived this life with determination. She lived this life with many joys. And she also knew all about pain. She lived this life following in the way of Jesus. She lived this life with God. Therefore this life on earth has been rich – a good foundation for what is to come – for we are taught, and it seems to me that Irene knew well, that we are to pray for the Kingdom of God to come “on earth as it is in heaven.” She spent her life bringing the Kingdom of God among us, and now – now she enjoys God’s Kingdom in a way that is beyond our comprehension – yet somehow we know – that today – Irene knows Peace. What a gift of grace and mercy God has promised us. Peace. Presence. Love.

Irene Abernathy Cole – faithful Child of God. May it be so for all of us as well.

Gracious God, we give you thanks this day for the life of Irene Cole. For the way that she graced us. For the way that she served us. For the way that she loved us – we offer our humble thanks. We know that her ability of grace and service and love were from you, and we ask that you would grant to us an abundance of what you gave to her. May our memories be strong that we may find comfort. May our hearts find comfort even as we walk this journey of grief. And may our lives be lived in the abundance of your grace.

Walk with us. Speak to us – that we may hear your still small voice in the midst of pain.

Be with this loving family and grant them your peace just as surely as you have granted it to Irene even today.