A Good Word for Ober

March 28, 2019

Psalm 90

*Lord, you have been our dwelling-place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.*

*You turn us back to dust, and say, ‘Turn back, you mortals.’ For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night.*

*You sweep them away; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning;*

*in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers.*

*For all our days pass away under your wrath; our years come to an end like a sigh.* ***The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong****; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away.*

***So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart****.*

*Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, and for as many years as we have seen evil… Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands – O prosper the work of our hands*!

The Psalmist, here, is a bit cynical about life: it’s full of toil and trouble. Even if we live strong, even if we get more than our share – 80 years of living – it’s gone in the blink of an eye. There is a cynicism about it, but with all of our scripture, a strong affirmation of the presence and goodness and justice and love of God.

Ober Pauley counted her days, and she gained a wise heart. Though she knew her share of trouble, she never lost faith. She knew the comforting presence of God, and at the end she had no fear. She was ready to go.

As I thought of Ober, it occurred to me that I should never have known her. The Psalmist says if we’re strong we may live 80 years. Amy and I have been her pastors for 19 years – and she was a young 84 when we met!

I’m glad Ober was strong enough that not only did she get a scriptural 80 years, but she got 23 more years as a bonus. Those 23 years were not only a bonus to her, but to all of us who knew her.

She was 84 when we met her, and she never really got old, You know what I mean? There was a youthful love of life, there was spunk and spit and health and humor and grace and grit all over her. To the very end. All the years we knew her, were a bonus.

Two stories that I’ll never forget…

One day the phone rang in the office and it was Helen. There was an urgency in her voice. She wanted to know if there was someone in the church who could take care of a snake at Aunt Ober’s house. (The things they don’t prepare you for in seminary!)

Amy and I went together. I grabbed a broom or a rake. I didn’t know if we were talking about a rattlesnake or a python or what…

When we got to the house Helen greeted us at the back door and we asked where Ober was. “In the bathroom,” she said. I said, “Well, where’s the snake.” “It’s in the bathroom, too!” I said, “So why did Ober go in the bathroom.” And she looked at me a little strange and said, “When you’ve got to go, you’ve got to go!”

So, when the right time came, Ober said I could open the bathroom door, and I walked in to find Ober standing in the bathroom with her foot on the snake. As it turns out, she didn’t need me after all!

It was a garter snake, about 12 inches long. I retrieved it from under Ober’s foot and took it to the back yard and released it. When I came back in I thanked Ober. You see, there’s a lot I can put on a resume, but I told her until that day I’d never been able to be called a “snake handlin’ preacher.”

Six or seven years ago, we had begun a new capital campaign. We owed a little to pay off our new building, and we needed to replace the HVAC system in the sanctuary… We reached out to everyone in the church asking for their support. One day the phone rang and it was Ober.

With a strong voice she said to me, “Russ, I knew we’re raising money for the church and I want to help, but I don’t have any money to give. But would you take my car? Can I give the church my car?”

I thanked Ober and said, “Well, of course. That would be very generous of you!” I was cheerful and grateful, though I couldn’t remember what kind of car Ober drove. I was pretty certain it wasn’t a new Lexus, but of course the church would take any donation she wanted to make.

I walked across the back yard and found her 1984 Oldsmobile Cutlass sitting in the car port. It was a beige two-door with whitewall tires. She had bought it new, and while it was about 30 years old at the time, it had right a 37,000 original miles on it!

Ober gave me the keys and told me to take it. She said again how glad she was that she could give something to the church. She hoped we’d be able to sell it and donate the money to the campaign. Which is exactly what we did.

And it didn’t take long. The buyer came all the way from Tennessee, because his mother had had one exactly like it. I think he gave us $2,200 for it, and he drove off with it, proudly.

And we have air conditioning in the sanctuary, because of Ober’s Cutlass Supreme!

Amy and I ate breakfast in a little bagel shop in Brooklyn, NY yesterday morning and a sign on the wall said, “Don’t count the days. Make the days count.”

Well, Ober Pauley counted her days – in the way that the Bible encourages us to do – And I believe it’s what made all of her days count. When she got to 80 years… she just kept on counting. If she had not, I would never have known her.

And your life and mine are better because every day she lived, really did count.

For the 103 years of Ober Pauley, thanks be to God.