

*A Good Word for  
Carolyn Marie Talley (“Sunshine”)*

SCRIPTURE

Marie’s niece, Wendy, found several passages of scripture marked and highlighted in the Bible Marie kept next to her bed. Among them, Paul’s words of comfort in Romans 8 – *nothing can separate us from the Love of God in Christ Jesus...* Marie had also underlined the soaring praise to love, found in 1 Corinthians chapter 13. As you hear these few verses from this impressive chapter, think of Marie’s life:

*4 Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant <sup>5</sup>or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup>it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. <sup>7</sup>It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. <sup>8</sup> Love never ends. [In the end...] *faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.**

EULOGY

I’m sure you’ve all known people who were really several different people. One person at the office. Another at the club. Perhaps a different person, still, at home. And, of course, their best person, at church. Marie Talley, was just one person. I have no doubt. When she greeted her pastor at the door of the church, she was a ray of sunshine. It was her dear Keely who first called her that – and he was right. But she wasn’t just his sunshine. Her family has said the same. And all of her friends. Old friends and young ones. New friends and those she has loved a lifetime.

Proverbs 18.24 says, *Some friends play at friendship, but a true friend sticks closer than one’s nearest kin.* One translation puts the word in quotations: some “*friends*”... There were no quotation marks around Marie’s friendship, for everyone who knew her, knew the genuine article. Through and through. You can make a lot of money in life, become powerful in business, excel in athletics or music; you can find the fame of glamour... but there’s hardly a better epitaph that could be written about anyone than what certainly is to be said of Marie Talley: she was a friend.

As a child, Marie was a mama's girl. Maybe she learned her caring ways from loving and being loved at the hem of a mother's skirt. One friend said she obviously had an "idyllic childhood." She idolized her big sister, Betty. On Marie's first day of Sunday School Betty had to come get her little sister, who wouldn't stop crying without her, and Betty also had to console her on the first day of school when Marie realized she had not gotten Betty's first teacher. The closeness in their relationship remained over the years, and it burned especially strong in Marie's final years. They took care of each other. Once, when times were tough, Marie moved to Tennessee. She helped out, financially, and with her joy and care. When Wendy went through a frightening hospitalization, the first course of action after receiving the medical diagnosis, was to buy a plane ticket. Get Aunt Marie here, stat! Through these family issues, this family's lifetime, the good and the bad, that bond grew in intensity. And when she needed family, you were there. Betty and Wendy, thank you. You gave Marie what she needed, and you provide an example the world would do well to emulate.

Wendy's reflection on Marie needs to be explored in about a dozen good sermons: we learn to love God, she said, by perfecting relationships in life. And Wendy learned from a master teacher: "Everyone should have an Aunt Marie in life who loves you perfectly." Wow. Jesus challenged his disciples, "*Be perfect... as your Father in Heaven is perfect...*" (Matthew 5.48). Too often people dismiss Jesus' teaching as if he was setting the bar up to impossible, just as the perfect challenge. But maybe not. Maybe the "perfect love" which Marie offered her niece, and so many others, tells us that Jesus said what me meant, and meant exactly what he said. Love perfectly – just like Marie. And then, Wendy said, "Marie [was] just more." As if one who loved perfectly could be any more!? I love that. "Just more."

Marie's perfect love, however, didn't stop with her family. As I have talked to various people from the four corners of Marie's life, it's clear that wherever Marie Talley went, people fell in love with her. Her work as an executive secretary at JP Stevens made her a valuable employee: loyal, dedicated, longsuffering, industrious. But it also gave her a whole new network of connections – more people to build more relationships with, so she could be “just more” to them, too. One JP Stevens friend recalls how they loved to laugh. And how it didn't matter how long it had been since they'd been together, when you saw Marie, you just picked up where you left off last. That's how friends do it!

Marie apparently kept everything she'd ever owned. “No... don't touch that,” she'd say if you tried to move something from her desk! A 1973 calendar (and you know how important it is to keep 40-year-old calendars!) reveals the life of a social butterfly. She just couldn't get enough of getting enough of people. There was something every day, every night. Jesus said he came that we might “*have life to the full*” (John 10.10) – and apparently Marie did! She was blonde and had beautiful blue eyes, a beauty queen for the JP Stevens Company, so you can understand why the men were attracted – but there was obviously an internal beauty that was true enough to endear girl friends as well. It's not always easy to be a beautiful woman and to have lots of friends, so it's clear that Marie's beauty was more than skin deep.

Marie was welcoming, and that's different from being cordially friendly, a smiling face. Several folks used that word when they talked about her. She welcomed me, one friend said, making me feel like family. This morning I ran into a church member who expressed regrets that he could not be here today, because Marie, he said, “was one of the first people to welcome us to this church.” She didn't just say, “good morning.”

The sunshine of Marie's life was the key to her character. Everyone agrees. And everyone who knew them knew that the late Keely Grice and Marie Talley were meant to be together. I did not know Keely, but had the privilege of speaking his eulogy a few years ago. I pulled out those words, and thought I could do no better than repeat one paragraph today:

Keely was devoted to his work; he was devoted to his sons and their families; and he was devoted to the "Sunshine" of his second life, Marie.<sup>1</sup> What a wonderful life you two had together, Marie. My favorite singer is a rock-and-roller named Sting, who sings in one of his old songs of the "secret marriage" that can exist between people.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes this marriage exists in the traditional form, but that institution is no guarantee. And sometimes it exists where, as Sting sings it, "no earthly church has ever blessed their union." Yours was certainly blessed, Marie. Your relationship was, I believe, what God intends for us in that sacred union – companionship and commitment – "till death us do part." And even now, I believe, you are not truly parted, because the scripture reminds us "*love never dies*" (1 Corinthians 13).

Today I say to you, because love never dies... I believe in some mysterious way that is beyond our knowing, they have been joined together again, this time in the eternity of the heart of God's love. She and Keely were supposed to be – first love or second love, it matters not. Their love and companionship were genuine, making family of Keely III and Stephen, who also cared for her attentively, and for the four grandchildren who blessed her with the title, "Grammy Sunshine." What a beautiful life they had together. What a beautiful legacy they leave.

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<sup>1</sup> Writing eulogies is difficult, sometimes tricky business. Without knowing much of Keely's early life and his life-changing divorce, I felt it necessary to offer a word of affirmation, that there was a "first life," too, which shaped him, produced his golfing career and, especially important, gave him two beloved sons.

<sup>2</sup> Sting, "The Secret Marriage," from his album, "The Dream of the Blue Turtles," 1985: "No earthly church has ever blessed our union / No state has ever granted us permission / No family bond has ever made us two / No company has ever earned commission / No debt was paid no dowry to be gained / No treaty over border land or power / No semblance of the world outside remained / To stain the beauty of this nuptial hour / The secret marriage vow is never spoken / The secret marriage never can be broken / No flowers on the alter / No white veil in your hair / No maiden dress to alter / No bible oath to swear / The secret marriage vow is never spoken / The secret marriage never can be broken..."

Everyone speaks of Marie's sunny disposition – and most have noted the irony, given some of the heartaches her life had known, and especially the health issues that plagued her for some years. But another of the texts Wendy found highlighted in Marie's Bible speaks not of the sunshine of an easy faith, but of the struggle, against friends and against God, which is recorded in the book of Job.

*Then Job answered [his "friends"]:* 'I have heard many such things; miserable comforters are you all. Have windy words no limit? Or what provokes you that you keep on talking?

*[BUT] ... 'If I speak, my pain is not assuaged, and if I forbear, how much of it leaves me? Surely now God has worn me out; [God] has made desolate all my company... And after a long lament against friends and God, Job says,*

*'O earth, do not cover my blood; let my outcry find no resting-place. Even now, in fact, my witness is in heaven, and [the one] that vouches for me is on high. My friends scorn me; my eye pours out tears to God, that [God] would maintain the right of a mortal... For when a few years have come, I shall go the way from which I shall not return. (Job, chapter 16)*

And these difficult words made me wonder, as Marie's pastor, if behind her perpetual smile, was there deep pain that she would acknowledge to no one, but to God? In the quiet of evening hours did she read Job and share his anguish? Maybe. One need not be surprised or disappointed if that be the case, though, because what I believe her sunshine told us is not that she was just putting on a happy face, a lifetime show for all of us, but that in whatever heartaches life had thrown her way, Marie had come to a mature understanding: so it is with faith... there will be heartache and disappointment – but God can still be found, not in the absence of our pain, but walking with us, every step of the way. Also noted in her Bible are the chapters of Job which, amid his struggle, contain one of the most glowing affirmations of faith in all of the Bible:

*For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God... (Job 19.25-26)*

I believe it was the root of her joy – that deeply satisfying, though never easy, walk with God from this life to the next. After knowing that Job was yet another of her friends, perhaps another close companion along the way, I will never think of her sunshine quite the same, ever again – thanks be to God.

For Marie, Sunshine, Talley... thanks be to God!