

A Eulogy for Roberta A Webb

October 26, 2006

Roberta Webb was a perfectionist. Her children knew it. She kept a meticulous, spotless house. When the auctioneers sold everything in it, down to the detergent under the kitchen sink, they said they had never seen a house so well-kept. She had high expectations of Judy. She spanked little Jim, every single day! She knew how things were supposed to be, and she would not rest until she had done all she could to make them so. It was the perfectionist in her that pushed her until the very end.

It's appropriate, then, that she chose these words to be read on this day:

Do not stand at my grave and weep
I am not there. I do not sleep.
I am a thousand winds that blow.
I am the diamond glints on snow.
I am the sunlight on ripened grain.
I am the gentle autumn rain.
When you awaken in the morning's hush.
I am the swift uplifting rush
Of quiet birds in circled flight.
I am the soft stars that shine at night.
Do not stand at my grave and cry;
I am not there, I did not die.¹

To be perfected is to be completed. So, in one sense, especially through the eyes of faith, we can claim that she has been made perfect. Her work is done. And, it's not. Roberta could not, would not think of death as "sleep" – there's still so much more to be done. I think there is great hope in such a living theology, even without reverting to the sentimentalism of the kind of "pie in the sky by and by" language we often hear at funerals. Roberta's faith believed, intuitively, in a kind of ongoing life, life again, with Bruce, life again through her children, life, forever in an ongoing pursuit of the perfection she never quite finished here.

¹ They came to me as an anonymous poem.

Jesus challenged his disciples, “*Be, therefore, perfect...*” (Matthew 5.48). It is a tall command. It is the kind of language that causes most people to shrug Jesus off as some kind of absurd idealist, one who is better worshipped than followed. But C.S. Lewis once commented that in the Greek language, the imperative and the imperfect forms of the word are spelled alike. A better translation might be, “*you will be perfect...*” “Perfection,” in this light, “is more a gift than a demand.”² It is something to which we strive, yet without the self abuse that often comes to perfectionists. So, there is grace – even in the pursuit of perfection.

It sounds to me that Roberta had something of that kind of understanding, especially in her later years. Perfection was something to strive for, but, ultimately, something that is done in us. John Claypool has commented of this insight: “[Perfection] is what God wants to do... what God is utterly, utterly capable of.”

I think it is fair to say that creation is not yet complete.³ As part of that unfinished work, we are all still being perfected. I believe that God is still perfecting us. And Roberta’s perfection is still being worked out – in those who knew her, those who were touched by her living. “Do not stand at my grave and cry; I am not there, I did not die.” The gift of her perfection is being worked out in a son and daughter who will continue to live her legacy as long as they can call her name and remember her disciplined love, her tenacious living, her quest for perfection.

The Apostle Paul says, “*Love never dies*” (1 Corinthians 13). And that is because love, too, is a perfectionist. Love will never, ever rest from its perfecting work “*in us, through us, above us.*”⁴ In a very important way, Roberta Webb taught those who knew her this truth. So as

² The late John Claypool gave this insight in a sermon he preached at Mountain Brook Baptist Church in Birmingham, AL. I was serving there as Associate Pastor at the time.

³ Paul speaks of this in his letter to the Romans: “*For the creation waits with eager longing... in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God...*” (Romans 8.19-22).

⁴ This is an allusion to Ephesians 4.4-5, “*There is one body and one Spirit... one God... who is above all and through and in all.*”

we think of her, let us know that her work of perfection is continuing, even in us. And let us give thanks: For Roberta Webb, daughter, sister, friend, mother... perfectionist: Thanks be to God.

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray,
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.⁵

This day we give thanks for Roberta Webb, who could not cease from her work, and who will continue that work in that “good night” to which she has now gone – working, perfecting – being perfected – forever, in the presence and peace of God. Amen.

⁵ Dylan Thomas, “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night.”