

The Grace to Let Go

Celebration of the Life of Sally Hammond

Psalm 23, Mark 15:34, John 19:28-30, Luke 23:46

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Sally's Garden
Grand Haven, Michigan
July 25, 2009

Prepared text of sermon

Being a pastor to the Hammond family for so many years, it was only natural that I should have been on the e-mail list Tom assembled from the first. The list grew as the shocking news of Sally's condition spread, but hearing the news from the first, I e-mailed Tom to say I was ready whenever they requested to come to them. A week or so later Tom called. They were ready for a pastoral visit and that afternoon Nancy and I went to them – Tom, Sally and Emily were there.

From the first hug at the door I was aware that this was the right time. Sally took me to the big leather chair, sat me down, moved the foot stool aside and sat on it – literally at my knee. It was one of those moments when one senses something very special was going on.

You might suspect that would have been a difficult call to make but it wasn't at all. The five of us spoke candidly, openly, easily of Sally's situation. We remembered so many great times – Tom and Sally twice accompanied Nancy and me on tours – once to Europe, once a New England Canadian cruise. And, of course, many years, wonderful years of shared moments at Christ Community Church. But there was no awkward avoidance of Sally's dire physical condition.

We spoke of the diagnosis and the prognosis and the decision Sally made to take no measure to deal with the cancer, methods that may have prolonged her life a bit but also robbed her of real life.

It is always unwise to say what one would do if one were in that circumstance when, as a matter of fact, one is not in that circumstance. I did, however say to Sally I affirmed her decision and that I hoped were I in that circumstance, I would choose as she did. There was total agreement in that family circle. It was obvious that they were together at peace with the decision Sally made – to live as fully and normally as possible every remaining day she had.

And she did!

I know of no finer expression of Sally's last day than the beautiful description from Tom's final e-mail.

Subject: *Sally Update*

Date: Tue, 21 Jul 2009 22:16:54

Hi Dear Friends,

Today I am writing to tell you that Sally passed away late last evening, not quite four weeks after discovering the tumor. During that time she dealt with everything with amazing dignity, humor, and love. This past Sunday we had one of the most amazing days I've ever experienced. She told us that she had decided that this was her last day and was very much at peace with it. She joined us on the porch in a rolling chair, weak but ate a lot of food, laughed a lot, reminisced.

She was radiant, obviously having made the decision herself. We had very warm, fulfilling goodbyes. Later that night she slipped into a deep sleep, spent Monday in a coma, and passed quietly about midnight.

We will always remember Sunday and the way she was. It was a real gift to us.

I'm so thankful for Abby, Emily, Susan, and Betsy being here. They have been a real blessing. I'm also so thankful for all of you who have been so concerned; your love and caring have been greatly felt.

Attached is the obituary that I wrote, then had the four girls improve. If you can be here on Saturday between 2 and 4, we would love to see you.

Thanks again. Tom

It was a gift; Sally turned tragedy into triumph. That's why we are here today to celebrate her life amidst the gardens she loved – to celebrate her life. Strangely enough, not with a heavy cloud of darkness hanging over us, not with weeping but with stories, memories, laughing and crying but in it all a sense of celebration of a life whose presence graced us for so many years.

Don't misunderstand me. This is no denial of deep grief, of sadness, of painful loss. The whole point of my reflections is to say there was no denial here – not at the first news, not in the ensuing month, not at the final good-byes. And there will certainly be grief through which to work for Tom, the girls, the family. But grief laced with remembering the way she was, grief through gratitude at the gift she gave, grief through joy at the remarkable manner of her departure.

I've entitled my reflections, "The Grace To Let go." She approached her end with dignity and departed with grace. Quite amazing really!

Thinking about these moments I thought of some of Jesus' words from the cross – My intention is not in any way to make the situation comparable; they are not. It did strike me however, that the words from the cross reflect the human reality of facing and coming to terms with our mortality when it faces us suddenly.

For Jesus, the expression "My God, My God why have you forsaken me?" That "why" is inevitable in our human situation – the feeling of being alone, abandoned – "My God, Why....?"

But then the normal human physical response – "I'm thirsty."

Her last day she ate with the family – was it the last supper, her final communion? But then, inevitably, the awareness of the end comes – For Jesus,

"It is finished."

And then finally,

"Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit"

Tom writes:

She had decided that this was her last day and was very much at peace with it. We had very warm, fulfilling good-byes. She slipped into a deep sleep – and passed quietly.

It is finished...Father into your hands...

I submit to you that Sally has modeled for us all the grace to let go and it is as beautiful as it is amazing.

In our visit with Sally and family a couple weeks ago I suggested we stand in a circle holding hands and I offered a prayer. At the conclusion we hugged. She said "I've been waiting for that." I sensed deeply that was the final notch and it brought deep peace. It was one of those rare moments when I knew it was not just I but rather all my person symbolized and embodied for her – It was a beautiful and deeply moving moment. And I knew anew the truth of what was a mantra at Christ Community:

All will be well
All will be well
All manner of things will be well

The words of the 11th century Nun, Mystic, Julian of Norwich
and to you all, family, friends, community –

All will be well.

Prayer

O God!

Somehow that address, that cry to the Sacred Mystery of our lives, of all of life,
issues forth from our depths – O God!
We come consciously into your Presence,
for we come to the limit of our ability to fathom meaning and purpose,
life's sweetness and its vulnerability –
indeed the beauty and the terror of creation, life's wonder and its fragility.

We come as a community surrounding Tom, Emily and Puya, Abby
and Sally's family in these moments,
offering our love and care and support.
We come acknowledging shock and sadness at the loss of this one,
so vivacious, so full of fun, of life; our Sally!
We can hardly take it in.

And then we run *into a paradox*:
How is it that such a great loss of one so young, so vibrant
with dreams yet to be fulfilled
does not bring with it a sense of tragedy and the blackness of despair?
We have been telling Sally stories, we have laughed about shared moments,
as we have remembered her mischievousness, her laughter, her humor,
her kindness and goodness.
Somehow today we cannot feel heavy of spirit, depressed or simply down.
A paradox indeed!

We do know why that is the case when we take a moment to reflect
on the gift she was and the gift she bestowed on her beloved –
the gift of living fully to the end with love and grace and dignity.
The gift of facing so honestly and courageously her imminent death.
Dear God, she was magnificent, a beautiful model of how to die.
Such courage, such strength were not recent add-ons to her being
but rather the lovely flowering of her nature, indeed, her soul.
We celebrate that.
We are in awe of our beloved Sally, loving wife, mother, sister, friend.
In the quietness of these moments,
We remember the way she was
Grateful that the luminosity of her being has irradiated our own
Grateful for this gift we've shared

The human encounter
Which has been divine

Our Sally, in whose face we've seen the face of God.
Even as she saw God in the face of Jesus
Jesus who taught us to pray saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.
Thy Kingdom come.
Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil:
For Thine is the Kingdom and the power, and the glory, for ever.

The love of God, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you
now and forever.