

Words for an Emerging Church

Wednesday, September 22, 2021

The Blessed Witness of a Welcomer

Welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. —Romans 15:7

When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?"

"Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit," Elisha replied. —2 Kings 2:9

A few weeks ago, we bade farewell to a dear saint as a memorial service was held for Sally Bright at Trinity Church in East Petersburg, and there was much to celebrate in that hour of worship! (Sally had died late in 2020, so her service was postponed until summer.) A few of you folks remember Sally, and all who knew her were blessed. Sally was married to Jim Bright who pastored St. Paul's Church in Manheim for many years and was a great support to the ministry. I got to know Sally over the years through our involvements in the Lancaster Association where she served many committees and made herself useful in so many ways. She was also on the Conference Board of Directors and travelled overseas with Jim for a brief period of ministry in Namibia. Sally had boundless energy and great skills for leadership.

While all this is worthy of grateful celebration, I always believed that Sally's real blessing to us all was her gift of a warm welcome. Sally always seemed to have a smile and warmly greeted all the folks she met. To the disgruntled and discouraged she would freely offer a word of encouragement, and there were a few times when in the rough and tumble of Association conflict Sally's smile and kind words were very gratefully received by this pastor! It was also a pleasant surprise when on more than one occasion the Brights would drop in on worship with us here at St. Luke's. Sally was an encourager who lived Romans 15:7.

While I already had a deep appreciation of her gifts for encouragement, this appreciation only grew deeper as I heard a wonderful testimony offered at the memorial. A woman rose to speak and introduced herself as one married to a nephew of Sally's. She said how she was so uplifted by the family gatherings which Sally would host and how special Sally's welcome made her feel when she arrived. Having passed on that word of gratitude, another family member chimed in that Sally greets everybody that way. For a moment she said that she felt a little disappointed. To hear that this greeting was merely the standard issue at such events made it all seem much less special, but this moment of deflation was short lived as another realization came to her. Truth be told, Sally made everybody feel special because she truly believed and

felt that each person was special! Sally lived Romans 15:7, and what a testimony to the love of Christ it was!

The cynic may remain unconvinced. "Can one really love everybody they meet?" All I can say to that is that if Sally didn't actually love everybody she met, she sure tried! I wonder what Sally would have to say if she was to be asked about her welcoming gift. Perhaps she would begin by telling how glad she was the Christ so graciously welcomed her and that it is a pleasure to pass on that favor. Perhaps she would quote Philippians 2:3-4 which exhorts us to humble kindness. *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.* And with this quotation she might add that this is precisely what Jesus did for us.

Sally is missed, and in our day, we so desperately need more Sally Brights. We need encouragers, and since these people are not going to appear magically, I suppose that it is up to us. But how can we be that welcoming? What was Sally's secret? As best as I can make sense of the matter, her secret was simply the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. And how shall we attain this same great power? Let us take a cue from the prophet Elisha, who when sadly bidding his great teacher Elijah farewell pleaded, "*Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit.*" God graciously granted Elisha his request, and I trust that he will do the same for us.

Blessings,

Pastor Jim

May the God of love who is the source of all our affection for each other formed here on earth take our friendships into his keeping, that they may continue and increase throughout life and beyond it, in Jesus Christ our Lord. —William Temple, 1881-1944