

A Good Word for Patsy Johnson
January 23, 2010

It seems to me that the obvious should be stated first – we do not understand, it does not make sense, it is not fair, it is not right – but we learned as little children that all is not right in this world, and all is certainly not fair, and often we are confused. And so we gather here this day to worship God and give thanks for the life of Patsy Johnson. And we gather here this day seeking comfort and to tell a story. The comfort that we will receive will come through hugs and tears and laughter and simply being together, and by God’s grace, we will make it through. The story we tell is God’s story – God’s story as told in the life of Patsy Austin Johnson. And God did indeed tell a good story through her and in her. Allow me to retell some of it for you today.

When she was but a wee child – still crawling and toddling at Dot’s feet, and Dot trying to contain her little ones on a pallet on the floor – long before “pack and plays” were all the rage – Patsy’s grandfather noted to Dot: you might be able to keep the first one quiet, but this one – you won’t be able to shut up. And Dot laughed as she told me that story because she got a lifetime of Patsy speaking her mind. Now a woman that can speak her mind often gets a bad rap. And that’s too bad - it should not be that way, because when I asked Patsy’s family, it was clear what was always on Patsy’s mind: Family – especially her children and her mother. Patsy dedicated her life to her family. Patsy and I were friends at church, and we were friends on Facebook. I checked her information there and this is how she described herself: “I’m still trying to figure out just exactly what I want to do now. My choice in life was to be a Mother. I am a Mom and forever grateful to have had the choice to be at home with my children. However, they have left the nest. I spend my time now meeting new people, seeing old friends, and serving the Lord.” And yes, she did those things – she met new people and she reconnected with old friends

and most certainly, she served God. But I think what she really did was continue to create Home – a safe haven - for her family, for her friends, for her church, and often for complete strangers.

So let's move from Patsy the small child to Patsy the young teen. I received an email yesterday from a church member that just moved away. He confessed that he didn't know Patsy very well, but he had been in charge of collecting some of the old stories of Park Road Baptist Church and he dug up an old email from Patsy. In it she retold this story that she entitled The Twist: "The children of the Robert Austin family were not allowed to do the `twist.' My father, who was a jukebox man, thought it was disgusting and obscene. One night, however, when the youth were gathered in the old teen room which is now the storage basement of the Youth Building, Charlie Milford dropped in for a visit. Chubby Checker was playing..."Come on baby, let's do the twist." Charlie jumped right in the middle of the ones dancing and started twisting. That's all it took. My sister and I made a beeline to the telephone to call our Dad. His response..."Well, if Charlie Milford can do the twist, then I guess it's okay for you and Martha to do it also." We did not waste any time getting to the dance floor!" Now first of all, I would give anything to have seen Charlie Milford doing the twist! But can't you just hear the life in Patsy's story? Can't you see the twinkle in her eye and the bright smile on her face remembering some of the good old days of her youth in this church? There she was, as I hear tell it, a Myers Park High School beauty queen and cheerleader, elected to these positions by her admiring peers, living it up at a place that gave foundation to her life. A group of those women have reconnected – calling themselves the Girls of '67 – twenty or so of these graduates of Myers Park High School have become community for one another again. And Patsy was in the thick of them all – doing what she did best – creating a home by reconnecting with old friends.

But it was the family that produced Elizabeth and Ben that gave the most meaning to Patsy's life. Creating a space where their friends were always welcome, Ron and Patsy's house became a refuge where judgment was not passed and soft drinks were always plentiful (though she did start charging 50 cents for a canned drink to try and recoup some cash – for creating safe havens is always costly.) And I will tell you the truth, any mother that would create a foster care home to take in 126 puppies, 12 kittens, a duck in the Jacuzzi, and 6 opossums from her daughter's work with the Humane Society is the kind of mother that lives out her commitment to care for all of God's creation.

When I asked the family to give me one word to describe Patsy, they rattled off a list: caring, compassionate, strong, determined, passionate. But Ben required two words: Mama Bear – for she was always going to protect her cubs. It was her fierce devotion to her children and to her mother that at times got the best of her. Is it possible to care too much? Both Liz and Ben agreed that Patsy could hold her own and go toe to toe with anyone – driven by her sense of rightness and goodness and genuine care for another. From what little time I've spent with you – I'd say this Mama Bear taught you well to hold on to what you believe with a passion and speak your truth. I'm guessing I don't really know you well enough to say this, but if my intuition is right – the two of you are the perfect combination of the best of your mother. So hold on tight to that and she will continue to live and so will you.

When Patsy moved back to Charlotte several years ago, it was you, Dot, who became her focus. Patsy still believed in the old school ways of living close by to family, getting chores done on Saturday so that Sunday could be devoted to church and eating Sunday lunch and visiting. Dot, she chose to share so much of her life with yours – including your lives here at church. And she threw herself into this place – perhaps at times continuing her lifelong tendency to take on

too much – often more than she wanted to chew (can anyone say Tableau?) – but she persevered – helping that angel say one more time *Fear not! For behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be for all people*. And her service on our Membership Care committee had her taking meals to newborns and cooking and setting up and cleaning up for so many families who have gathered here just like hers does today. Dot, I think she must have learned those mothering and tending skills from you. How we take care of each other matters. It is one way that we honor the God that gave us to one another in the first place. And so we must be diligent – as diligent as Patsy – to take care of each other.

But today . . . today we have our questions, our grief, our loss. And they run so deep. Even in the midst of many good memories, it's hard to imagine a more difficult moment than the one we now share, sitting here together hanging on the edge of human understanding – trying to find some answers, attempting to find the right questions in the silence of someone that we have loved and who is now gone. We have been changed by what has happened – changed in ways that we don't even really understand. But today is not a day to pretend. God is certainly not honored by that. Depression is serious – a disease that can be every bit as lethal as cancer. I said earlier that creating safe havens is costly and I asked if it was possible to care too much. We've all racked our brains, relived our last conversations, looked for clues. And we've all come up short of answers. We shouldn't hesitate to admit these things – for in failing to acknowledge Patsy's pain and our questions, we certainly aren't hiding anything from God. And this should be a safe place to name them both – pain and questions. In her best joys, God celebrated. In her deepest pain, God suffered. And in the end, God was there to catch her when she didn't believe she could hold on. As you heard the ancient text earlier, the prophet Isaiah gave voice to God's

way: When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned. (Isaiah 43)

I was moved that this family wanted to do something that would honor Patsy's memory. But it needed to connect to who she was so that she would continue to be. And that sense of creating home kept coming up. Patsy made a home wherever she lived, and she was never hesitant to think outside the box. Whether it was Habitat for Humanity or actually taking a family in until she could help them get into public housing, she was always looking after the needy. And so I filed back through my email exchanges with Patsy and came upon this one that she wrote to me after spending the night with our Family Promise ministry – a mission of our church where we house homeless families 4 weeks out of the year in our building. After several email exchanges back in 2008, Patsy and I shared with each other how burdened we felt by the fact that families were living in their cars for months at a time. And we were so glad that they could at least find a sense of home for themselves in our youth building – even if it was temporary. Patsy wrote, “Forgive me for going on...I take their lives and problems home with me also. Keep reminding myself that we are the encouragers and not their solution. I read a good book by a man from Atlanta about reneighboring communities. He stressed **empowering** people to take control of their lives, not by handing out, but **lifting up**. He gives the example of the chrysalis, which if broken open by human hand, will not survive. It is the struggle of breaking through its outer shell that enables it to learn to fly.” Sometimes that outer shell is simply too hard to break through – at least that was the case last Wednesday for Patsy. But her life is a testimony of breaking through in order to fly. She wanted it for her mother and for her children and for all of her family and for every person that was down and out that crossed her path. And so, the family has asked that any memorial monies given to the church be designated for our

Family Promise mission. And you can know that each time a family has a warm, safe space in which to sleep in our church, and every time a load of clothes is washed and dried, and every time a meal is served and families and church hosts share a table – Patsy will continue her life’s work of creating Home – a safe haven - what she gave to so many in this room. It is a fitting way to remember and celebrate Patsy.

On this day, we end as we began – still not understanding, it still not making any sense, it still not being fair or right – but we cling to the Blessed Hope of the Forever Home with God – that what began in Patsy here will live on in God forever. For Patsy Austin Johnson – Thanks Be to God. May it be so. Amen.