***A Good Word for Harriet***

Harriet Bryant was easy to love. She was sweet and quiet. She had a subtle sense of humor. She never complained. She was bright and insightful, a woman ahead of her time. And she was always there. Loveably late, but always there. She was “there” for her children and for her grandchildren. “There” for her friends. And “there,” meaning, here, at her church, “every time the doors were open.” We have commented over the years that in a new day for the church no one is here every time the door is open, not even active church folks. Except for Harriet! If we were here, Harriet was going to be “there,” too. (Better late than never!)

While the pastoral role provides us an opportunity to know the intimate details of some people’s lives, as we sit with them through good times and bad, at the highest and hardest moments of life, it also holds us at a distance from others. We see some folks on Sundays, speak at the door, “Have a great week,” and that’s it until the next time.

But over the course of 19 years, because Harriet never missed anything, we knew her. Funerals don’t get easier after two decades, because Harriet wasn’t just a church member who spoke at the door on Sundays, she was our friend.

For almost all of our years here I have led a Tuesday morning Bible study. Harriet never missed “Coffee and Kibitz.” After coffee and a few goodies, I talk and they kibitz… The dictionary says, “to offer unwelcome advice”! That’s a little preacherly playfulness on the relationship of pulpit and pew. Your advice is rarely unwelcome. Harriet’s never was.

Over the years the book studies I’ve chosen, the Bible studies I’ve taught have led us into a wide variety of terrain, from biblical interpretation to theological exploration to commentaries on ethics and sexuality and religion and politics and culture. Nothing has been off limits. Nothing too daring, nothing too difficult – and Harriet has been right there for all of it.

Thanks in part to Harriet Bryant, I stopped being surprised a long time ago at Senior Adults who are open-minded and accepting, willing to think and to change and to challenge conventional ideas and norms. Harriet was raised in a conservative southern culture and had seen a dizzying world of change in her lifetime. I want to be as progressive as Harriet when I’m 93, open to the inescapable fact that the world never stops changing.

This is no longer the church of the Board of Ed and Tableau. It isn’t the Charlotte that Harriet Bryant knew as a child, as the mother of two young children, as a working woman in a bustling city. And ours isn’t the world of Walter Cronkite and Leave it to Beaver. The world keeps changing – and Harriet never seemed to resist that change.

She didn’t speak a lot, but when she did, her words spoke of wit and wisdom and a way of being in this world that finds its comfort in a solid, steady, quiet, consistent faith.

Those often-quoted words from the book of Proverbs speak of Harriet in so many ways:

*A capable woman, who can find? She is far more precious than jewels.*

*The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain.*

Harriet and Bill Bryant were partners in life and love and in the business they managed together.

*She works with willing hands… she rises while it is still night provides food for her household.*

*She considers a field and buys it… She perceives that her merchandise is profitable.*

Harriet understood the world of business, and after Bill was gone, she carried on in the world of banking, enjoying her career and providing for her family.

*She opens her hand to the poor, and reaches out her hands to the needy.*

Harriet had a compassionate heart.

*Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come.*

Neither the present state of affairs nor the future of the church or the world worried Harriet. Come what may, she believed God is always with us.

*She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.*

Just ask her granddaughters about this!

*Her children rise up and call her happy; her husband too, and he praises her:*

*Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.*

Harriet Bryant was a beautiful woman. The portrait that hangs in her home of her as a 16 year-old girl will attest to that. But we will remember her not for her physical beauty but for a characteristic much more important.

*Give her a share in the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the city gates.*

Harriet Bryant was praised in the city for her work, and she received a share of the fruit of her hands. From rather meager beginnings she enjoyed a comfortable, good life.

So today we celebrate. Park Road Baptist Church will not be the same without her – but we will all be better because of her. For Harriet’s long life, for her deep love and her wise counsel, for her ever-present spirit, yesterday, today, forever, for Harriet Bryant, thanks be to God.