A Good word for Betty Sigmon

December 29, 2009

I will miss Betty Sigmon. I will miss her quiet, but assuring presence. On Sunday mornings, after making the rounds on campus, if I ventured through the church narthex, Betty was always there. It was the narthex Sunday School class, and there was only one member – but she was faithful. Always there. Sitting quietly and reflecting. Sitting quietly and thinking. Sitting quietly in the church she loved. And when I would come through, there was always a big smile and a kind word for her pastor. She kept that big smile and that kind word until the very end. When I visited Betty the last several months of her life, when I crossed the threshold a big smile would break out on her face, even when she was on that ventilator, and she offered her kind word with a gesture that said, “I’d like a hug, please.” And I was always glad to oblige.

I will miss that quiet, sure, and assuring presence. The world would be a better place if more people could offer such a presence. It may be Betty’s lasting mark on this world.

56 years ago (56 years ago) Betty’s sister was dating a fellow named Wayne Hooks, who introduced Betty to a young, handsome friend of his named Pat Sigmon. It was the beginning of a 6-year courtship that ended only when that quiet young woman said to that handsome young man, “Enough of this, Pat – let’s get married.” And so they did. That’s the way it was with Betty – when she did speak, it was because she had something to say. And because Betty always meant what she said, when she spoke, people listened. Words have their greatest impact when they are punctuated by a life, however quietly practiced, that speaks for those words. And Betty’s life spoke for her words. As a friend… as a spouse… as a mother…

Cindy spoke the greatest honor one can be given when she said, “My mother was the nicest person I’ve ever known.” You won’t win an Academy Award on such praise; you won’t get elected to public office; such praise won’t put money in your bank account – but it will make you rich, beyond measure. Daughters and mothers have that relationship, you know, that doesn’t always lead a daughter to offer such a word of praise. Cindy said, “Everybody thinks their mother is wonderful.” (Unfortunately, they do not.) But Cindy said plainly, “I really had a good mother.” These are simple, profound words, and they speak for themselves.

Betty was quiet at home, though Cindy remembers her mother softly singing hymns at night. Not unlike her father, who played his hymns on the fiddle, Betty raised her praise with a quiet voice. When so many homes are marked by the noise of conflict and chaos, theirs was marked by Betty’s quiet way – and it was a home where everyone was at home. I can’t think of a better compliment. Cindy’s friends and cousins liked to be in the Sigmon home; they were comfortable there. There were no favorites in Betty’s home: everyone felt happy, important, respected. That’s surely a tribute to Betty’s quiet leadership and influence.

Adolescence is often marked by strife between parents and their children – maybe especially between fathers and sons, mothers and daughters. But in the Sigmon home, Cindy says she was made to feel respected and trusted by both her father and her mother. The southern author, Ferrell Sams, speaks of southern parenting and homes in which children were Raised Right. He uses two upper case R’s, perhaps to indicate that there is something truly sacred about such a thing. As I listened to a grateful daughter speak, I thought of the author’s description of a proper raising. It was a raising that Cindy knew, first hand.

Trust, respect, confidence between parents and a child say a great deal about the child’s character – but character is never born in a vacuum. It is inherited. The quiet confidence that Betty had in her daughter’s character was, then – in a way Betty would never have claimed for herself – a compliment to her own character. When the prophet Isaiah says, “*In quiet confidence shall be your strength*” (Isaiah 30.15), he speaks of Betty Sigmon.

That quiet confidence marked all of her relationships, not least of which was that now-famous canasta group. For over 30 years the Austins, Privettes, Wilsons, Geralds, Edwardses, Wells, and Sigmons gathered on Friday nights. In that gathering everyone came to know Betty’s friendship through her quiet confidence. What a wonderful testimony to the presence of God among us – a group of friends who gather together so faithfully for so long, to enjoy the challenge and strategy of a game, but, mostly, the fellowship that it can bring. In addition to the canasta, they traveled together, to the beach and even once to Hawaii, where Betty could experience the beauty of nature which she so loved.

At those gatherings and in others, Betty was known for her desserts. Maybe it was because she loved to read her “Better Home and Gardens” magazines so faithfully. Maybe it was because she collected so many recipe books. But maybe it was just because she knew something about the sweetness of life itself that she was able to put all that sweetness into a pie dish or on a cake plate. As Jackie Gleason used to say, “How sweet it is!”

I have a deep appreciation for Betty’s quiet confidence – and no where more than in the faith she held so dear. Hers was a simple faith. It was faith, in Jesus – just as she was taught as a child. But there was more. To have been raised in the south, with its conservative values, values which lasted Betty’s 80 years, there was a quiet openness that I deeply appreciate. I sensed this in Betty, and had it confirmed in my conversation with Pat and Cindy on Sunday. “She wouldn’t argue,” they said “—about anything.” “Everyone had a right,” Betty told Cindy, “to believe the way their parents raised them. You should never judge people by their religion.” Even on the hot button issues of our day, issues that often bring out the worst in people, due to the conflict they can engender – Betty was quiet. “It’s not for me to judge,” she would say. “You’ve got to live your faith, not argue it.”

Like the life she lived, hers was a faith of quiet confidence. It was a faith that will be missed. It was a faith the world could use more of.

Pat said to me several time, “You don’t realize what you have until it’s too late.” That is too often true. But the good news, Pat, is that in the big picture, it’s never too late. Never too late to begin living a life even more filled with gratitude. Never too late to live a life making amends where we feel we’ve failed. Never too late to begin living our own lives with more of that quiet confidence that marked Betty’s life. And that will be the final word, which is never final – because the life Betty lived lives on. The faith Betty claimed is even now making a difference in this world. The God she trusted is still God. The Jesus she learned to love as a child is still *her resurrection* and is now, truly, her *life*. Now and forever.

For Betty Sigmon, and the life of quiet confidence, Thanks be to God.