

A Homily
by the Reverend Dr. D. Stuart Dunnan
At the Funeral for Spence Perry
St. John's Episcopal Church Hagerstown
15 November 2017

Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd; I know my own, and my own know me."

In nomine . . .

When I was a young man just out of college and teaching I think for my second year at Harvard School in Los Angeles, I was home in Washington for Thanksgiving when I received a call from my Uncle Grant in Maine in which he told me that his wife, my mother's sister, and so my Aunt Patsy, "AP" for short, was dying after a heroic fight with cancer, and that she wanted to see me.

"But I have to get back to California," I told him, and he said, "Stuart, she's dying." So, I called the school to tell them I would be returning late, got on another plane, and flew to Maine.

You see, I was my Aunt Patsy's favorite nephew, and she made no secret about it, which was a great gift to me as the middle of five children. She went to Vassar and studied history and read books, and she was a devout Episcopalian who made her communion every Sunday, so we were a natural fit. She and Uncle Grant would take me on trips all over the country, as he loved trains, and she needed a pal to keep her company. She was really my second mother. So, because she was dying, she wanted to see me, even before her mother and her sisters. She wanted to say goodbye.

As you know, Spence had a long period at the end of his time with us when he was dying, almost six months by my reckoning, and I found myself thinking of my Aunt Patsy when I would visit him during that time in his little room at Fulton County Medical Center.

I thought of her, I think, because they were much alike – avid readers and people of the mind, but with warm and loving hearts. As I think about it, they were both civic minded and very active in their chosen causes. But I also thought of her because she was the first person I ever visited who was dying, and like Spence, very close and very important to me.

I think that I also thought of her because she died when she was the age that I am now, and Spence was only 17 years older than I am, so my own death seems closer than it used to be, something which may be true for you as well.

But most importantly, like Spence, she was interested in what she was experiencing as she lay dying, and shared with Spence the same insight about life and about our purpose in life that all faithful, intelligent, and loving people gain when they face death openly: that the God of Love whom Christ reveals to us is real, that “life is changed, not ended”, and that the love that we have known and that we have shown with our lives is all that matters when we say goodbye.

I remember asking my aunt when I first arrived in her room, as I always asked her, and would often ask Spence and he would often ask me, “What are you reading?”

“Nothing,” she answered. “Books aren’t important anymore.” “What is?” I asked. “People,” she answered.

When I first visited Spence, he would have a folded newspaper on his tray table and the news on, but then, the paper disappeared, then the tv became background noise, and finally, there was just the two of us – two good friends in a hospital room.

And we really could not talk about the news anymore, which was a blessing, and certainly not about what we were reading. He would tell me what he was thinking about, and ask about the school, and often tell me how grateful he was to Cinda, and then we would pray, and he would make his communion. I remember one time recently when I asked him what he would like to pray about, and he said, that he would like to say that prayer which mentions “the whole state of Christ’s Church.”

Spence was thinking of a prayer from our traditional Communion Rite, the one which he and I still remember from our youth and like most born Episcopalians, still cling to. To me, it spoke of his childhood in Jacksonville and the quality of his education at Baylor and Harvard and Duke, of his love of language as a writer, but also I suspect of that greater sense of the whole Church not just “militant, here on earth,” but more fully alive and triumphant in our life with Christ to come.

As we know, and as we just celebrated on All Saints Day, Christians believe in “saints” in two senses: the “Saints” with a capital “S” who served Christ so fully while on earth that we can pray to them with confidence in their risen life with Christ, but also the “saints” with a small “s” who struggle still to join them. Spence was one of those, as am I, as are you. These are the saints for whom we pray, both in this life and the next, mindful of the many weaknesses caused by our common humanity, but also confident in the love and grace of God.

And to his great credit, Spence knew this. He knew this in large measure because he was a recovering alcoholic, so he knew his weaknesses and temptations intimately, and he faced them honestly, bravely, and daily for 37 years. Now, here I am not telling you anything that you do not know, because he was entirely open about his recovery, and this openness was a great gift to others in the AA community who relied upon him for his advice and the encouraging example of his sobriety.

I once asked Spence when I was visiting him what he was thinking about, and he answered: “the last period of my life.” “Oh,” I said, “that’s the best part.” “Yes,” he said, “much better than what came before it.”

Now, if you looked at Spence’s resume, you would not think so. He had several grand adventures: his time as a reporter at the Houston Chronicle and his service in Vietnam, and of course his remarkable career in government, rising to the highest grade of the civil service, but he always believed that he got it right when he married Cinda and moved to Hagerstown. He cherished his life with her, Dale, and Tom.

And what I think was especially wonderful about his time in Hagerstown and then also in McConnellsburg was that he did not cease to be a civil servant, but rather became more truly a civil servant, no longer the distinguished General Counsel of FEMA, but an active volunteer, serving with great devotion and real effort on the boards of the several charitable organizations he supported and about which he cared so deeply.

And he wrote beautifully and thoughtfully in Hagerstown Magazine and then the Herald Mail about our history and our present, about what was happening and what needed to happen, on a much deeper level than any of us had ever really considered before. And he would take you to lunch, wouldn’t he? And sit you down, and tell you gently but firmly just what it was that you needed do in order to get with the program. That was a gift of his AA experience as well: he could “speak the truth in love”, just as St. Paul tells us we should do.

Spence befriended me immediately when I arrived as a ridiculously young and full-of himself headmaster, and I will be forever grateful to Frank Carden for introducing us. (We were a Harvard Club with three members.) And he became for me, as he was for so many others, the wisest, most loving, and most loyal of friends. And here, I know, I speak to many here who also grieve for him as I do, because he had a tremendous capacity for friendship which belonged to an earlier age. There was something very eighteenth century about a friendship with Spence; he was our own Dr. Johnson: a man of letters and wise sayings, wide and focused in his interests, a unique personality, and very good company.

I always used to look forward to Spence's account of his annual road trip with Ken Long, as his stories perfectly illustrated Spence's love of adventure and of the South, and of his abiding interest in the lives of real people, his writer's joy in watching and learning and digging ever deeper into the hidden stories around us.

But the greatest gift to Spence in his recovery was God's gift of humility, which is never easy to receive when you are as distinguished, clever, and learned as Spence was. But without that gift, Spence would never have lived here in Hagerstown with us, nor joined in our community so fully and so generously, for he was in truth - in so many ways - much too grand for us.

You could see this in his teaching at Saint James, where he developed a class in "Political Economy" which drew upon his remarkable life and experience, so was truly fascinating and a great gift to our sixth formers. It helped of course that he was a very generous grader, easy really, but again, he had nothing to prove and felt no need to intimidate his students. He would also speak in Chapel, and he was spell-binding. He never missed a faculty meeting, and he always brought his own Diet Pepsi. I usually received a discreet report on my performance afterwards. I think I averaged about a "B+."

I remember after 9/11, he came to my office, sat me down and told me what the Emergency Plan for Washington County was, and that the school was in it, as he thought I should know. And I remember thinking afterwards, “Wow. I had completely forgotten who he was.” He was outstanding on the Board, as he was on so many boards; he never missed a meeting and volunteered to be Secretary, which is, of course, a thankless job. He was particularly deferential and courtly with Mrs. Fulton, which was always just lovely to watch. Needless to say, she was very fond of him, and I suspect that they are discussing me right now.

What a wonderful gift he was to us – really. I just pray to God that we did not take him for granted.

And I also ask that each of us try, now that he is no longer with us, to be as humble, thoughtful, generous, and maybe even just a little bit as interesting – and as interested - as he was.

May his soul and the souls of all the faithful departed through the grace and mercy of God rest in peace.

Amen.