

Coached Up to Show the Proof of God's Love in You

II Corinthians 8:16-24 and Luke 10:23-28,33

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In 1979 – 38 years ago – in San Antonio, I met a man whom I admired for the four years of my time living there. I admired him for his calm demeanor, his clear and deep integrity, the sparkle of joy in his eyes, the flash of righteous anger from those same eyes if the situation warranted, his dry and on-target wit, and the gladness about life which his gentle laughter could communicate. In the 34 years since I moved from San Antonio, I have only slightly kept up with his life into his retirement and following his wife Jane's death only a few years ago. Had I been a child or a teenager, I might have said, "When I grow up, I want to be like Joe." Really, though, as a young adult, I still wanted to grow up and be like Joe. When I think about it, Joe – in many ways – reminded me of my own father, who had died earlier in the same year when I later met Joe.

You are likely wondering if I've forgotten where I am, or what I'm supposed to be doing here this morning; but here's the connection: When I read Sue's obituary, I learned something which I'd never had as information to ask her about in the almost ten years I've known her, but which, last evening, I asked Rick and David about.

The man I met in San Antonio during the second half of 1979 is named Joe Owen. He is named for Sue's father, because Joe's dad and Sue's dad were brothers. While the obit states that Sue's father and uncles – before her husband – included Presbyterian ministers, at least one of her cousins, also, is a Presbyterian minister!

A few decades ago, someone said, "Theological wisdom is not communicated by genes and chromosomes," meaning that any and all wisdom results from perceptivity and critical analysis." Well, positive character may or may not be communicated by genes and chromosomes, but last evening the conclusion came to my mind that the reason I have felt so at ease in Sue's presence across the decade I've known her is because I've known some of her DNA from 30 years before, and that does not include the ten years I've also known Rick and David. I mean knowing Sue's first cousin, Joe, named for her father.

Rick and David mentioned to me that even during her last illness, only a few days ago, Sue and Marcie were engaged in a conversation related to the verses we've read from 2nd Corinthians, chapter 8, in which Sue, in her declining strength, perked up to offer Marcie her (Sue's) thoughts on the significance of the verses which had been mentioned.

I wasn't there. I don't know exactly what Sue said, but I know how much I have been encouraged across the years by these very verses. The Corinthians were a tough group as a church, as tough as any church can be, as tough as any church of which Sue was ever a member, in growing up, as a single young adult, or in the glass house which is the life of a preacher's spouse, especially decades ago. For, in any church, persons – including Sue – can experience how people very often decline to embrace the generosity of God's Spirit as Jesus lived and taught. Now, that doesn't stop God from working through Jesus, and through Paul twenty years beyond Jesus; it doesn't stop God from working through persons' lives in every time and place seeking for them and us to observe relationships not with clannishness,

defensiveness, miserliness, and resentfulness, but with love, courage, hope, helpfulness, and trust.

Jesus told a parable to illustrate this – a parable which we call “the Good Samaritan,” which most who originally heard Jesus believed to be a contradiction of terms – an oxymoron – because there was no such person as a “good” Samaritan. Most who heard Jesus – with whom he shared the rich faith tradition of Moses and the faithful prophets, (most who heard Jesus) thought he was just wrong in suggesting (subversively) that a Samaritan’s actions exemplified God’s reaching-out care, mercy, and non-discriminating love. Just before telling this parable, though, as an aside, Jesus says to his disciples that there is an opportunity to celebrate God’s love reaching out to others, through his (Jesus’) life among their own, as challenging as this encounter with God’s gospel truth was for them, and is for any of us in our time. Following Jesus’ lead puts a sparkle in the eyes of those who share God’s unearnable yet personalized love, even when the sharing costs significantly.

It’s the same challenge about which Paul – twenty years or so later – was writing to the emerging Christians in Corinth: Being a neighbor like that “good Samaritan” to folks you hardly know or do not know at all is challenging. People may talk about you behind your back when you reach out to others beyond the group’s particular preferred boundaries. They put qualifications and limits on their friendship with you. Paul writes about this to the Corinthians, as Jesus had taught and lived a few years earlier, and both are saying to God’s people: “Reach out even at the potential cost of others’ rejection. Reach out anyway.”

You know, as I do, how Sue – following Jesus’ and Paul’s examples and teachings – (how Sue) coached up others with her own life to show the proof of God’s love every day among God’s people regardless of how different they as individuals seem to be from us, or we from them. Sue was not Jesus, but as Jesus said to his disciples, “You have seen in me what kings and queens and rulers only wish they could see and possess.” Is it any wonder to any of us what Sue could see when her eyes danced and sparkled? She was seeing with her mind’s eye and her faith’s eye “what kings and queens and rulers have desired to see and possess.” You and I have been privileged to experience a coaching up – through Sue – to show the proof of this love from God in our several challenging relationships every day we are given breath.

Dust, to which our own bodies return after death, is natural, but is also a dull residue of the sparkle of grace that continues across the years in the life-witness of those touched by the grace and power of God’s vulnerable goodness experienced in part through Mary Sue Owen Avery’s life. The life-witness of those like Sue – God’s servants / Jesus’ disciples / our neighbors, cousins, sisters, brothers in God’s family – their life-witness enriches us day by day, and we know it. Thank God we know it; and thank God we are led to share – with a “knowing” sparkling in our eyes – God’s vulnerable-yet-transforming love in relationships we are given. It’s a sparkling of the eyes of faith which “kings and queens and rulers have desired to see and possess.” Maybe some of them experienced that faith and joy for reaching out in challenging situations; maybe some did not. But Sue did. And our eyes sparkle still because she and others have shared as much with us. – All honor and praise be to God.