

A TRANSFORMATION STORY WITHIN THE HEMINGWAY CULTURE

5-5-06

Ruth Purdy was baring her soul to her hairdresser. “You know, there is one nightmare that keeps recurring in my dreams, and even when I am awake.” “Yeah? what is it?”, Stacy asked. “It is this: that at my funeral, the pastor in charge will not even have known me!” “Oh! Easy! I can fix that!”, Stacy laughed. “I’ll introduce you to my pastor. He’d love to get to know you!”

That was the beginning of some twelve visits with Pastor Manfred Berndt over the next two years. Ruth was loved by many. For her 90th birthday bar-b-que over 400 came to her ranch. Her husband “Bud”, 76, worked long hours, was the regular chief cook for the annual October hunting party of six men, still piloted their small airplane, and was a highly respected leader in the county. As vice-chairman of the board, he helped raise over 20 million dollars for the new St. Luke’s hospital building. He loved to romance his wife.

At the first visit, Ruth proudly showed Pastor Berndt the many large pictures of children, grandchildren, and especially of “Papa” Ernest Hemingway (as he was affectionately called). Also hanging on the wall was “Papa’s” leather flask of wine, one of his guns, and many pictures from their regular hunting parties, including “Papa’s” wife Mary, a tall actor frequent visitor, Gary Cooper, and Ruth and Bud Purdy. Ruth, now 93, needed a walker; but her mind was sharp, her attention totally focused, and no word wasted. She delighted in telling anecdotes from hunting quail with Ernest; the teenagers would trap magpies and fill gunny sacks with them, then they released one bird at a time, throwing it high into the air, while the men then practiced their skeet shooting.

About one hour into the meeting, Ruth’s demeanor changed. “Pastor, you know why I asked you to come here”, she said. “This is something very important to me, and I have been thinking about it a lot. As you can tell from my stories and pictures here, I have enjoyed the ‘Hemingway clan’. They are, in general, life-loving, vivacious, and smart. But, three things about them concern me more and more. 1. There is so much depression among them; 2. There is so much suicide among them; and 3. Their funerals are so depressing, downright awful! I DON’T WANT MY FUNERAL TO BE LIKE THAT! I want to know as much as possible about the Christian faith! Will you teach me? Will you do my funeral?” I reassured her that I would love to.

After about half a dozen sessions she was ready and eager to join Valley of Peace Lutheran Church in Hailey, ID. Ruth had a grand daughter, “Ruthie” who lived near Boise, ID, two hours away. Ruthie herself had a journey of faith that peaked in her becoming a Christian and joining one of the evangelical churches. It was her most burning desire that the dearest person in her life, her grandmother, would come to faith, too, and they would both be together in heaven. At the same time, Ruthie was fully aware that the strong “New Age” environment in Blaine county was quite hostile to Christianity, and so she did not want to be over-bearing in her witness and squash her dream. But when she found out about her grandma’s meetings with me, becoming a member of a Lutheran church, and even receiving Communion, inside her heart she squealed with

delight! And for me, as pastor, it was a huge encouragement to know that, all long, Ruthie was praying furiously!

Ruth Purdy died Feb. 26, 2006. Her last words were a Christian witness. During their first meeting with the funeral director, several family members stressed that – even though they themselves had not yet become Christians, the role of the new-found faith for Ruth at the end of her life was such a transforming event, it HAD TO BE emphasized at the funeral. They also teased Ruthie for how thrilled she was to finally get her wish that Ruth would be with her in heaven. Ruthie turned that tease into a boomerang; looking grandpa Bud in the eye’, seriously and lovingly she said to him, “Grandpa: if YOU were the one whose funeral we are having right now, then, let me tell you: I’d REALLY BE WORRIED!”

About 450 people came to the funeral in the high school auditorium – including top politicians of both parties in the county, business and hospital leaders and physicians. Since “New Age” is so rampant in the county, some estimated that roughly 80% of the crowd may have been non-believers. It seemed a perfect crowd to hear God’s Law and God’s promises; but also, in view of how very much loved Ruth was by all, it was a huge opportunity to share with the crowd the testimony from Ruth herself, what she asked me to tell them: how, according to the Bible, we are all sinners, in need of a Savior; how, when Christ died on the cross, two things happened: 1. Our sins were paid for, totally; and 2. by faith, Christ’s righteousness covers us, his “good behavior”, as it were, is credited to our account.

And that is not the end of it; it is only the beginning. Through that funeral, God planted seeds and started a chain reaction of conversions and growth in the faith of seekers.

Manfred Berndt,
P.O. Box 4483, Hailey, ID 83333.
208-578-7853 mnjberndt@cox.net