

Rev. Anthony T. Bertram

FOR GOD SO LOVED ELAINE
John 3:16; Elaine Cottew Funeral; May 9, 2019

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer. (Ps 19:14) Amen.

One of the best ways to find out what's important to someone is to see what she works hardest at, what she makes sure gets done. One of the things Elaine worked hard at was making notes of Bible verses on scraps of paper and saving pages of devotion books that were really meaningful to her, things she wanted included in her funeral service today.

One of those scraps of paper is dated Dec. 4, 2018. In labored handwriting Elaine wrote: "I am finding this too hard to write appropriately. I can't write fast enough for my thoughts. I am not sick like I was yesterday morning – yet. That was the worst ever." What was so important to her that she wrote with such effort? "Sermon text: **For God so loved the world, he gave his only Son, that whosoever believeth [in Him] shall not perish but have everlasting life.** Look what I have to look forward to! (Heaven)" Next she wrote out the whole text of the 23rd Psalm. Then she listed who should sing a solo at her funeral, that we should sing the hymn "Jesus Loves Me," and the order her children should enter in procession into church at her funeral. These are the things that were important to Elaine.

She also left a short handwritten autobiography that started with her meeting Howard, then their marriage, the family they started, the hard work on the farm and later "punching the clock" working for others, struggles they endured, the churches they attended, the losses they experienced together, health setbacks, Howard's death and her second marriage to Darwin. It makes for an interesting read. (I found it hard to believe that large eggs in the 1950s sold for 65 cents per dozen.) I'll read a short passage to give you a sense of her writing style.

"Our home to be [in Lakota] was very run down and in much need of repair. Nora was one of the first born in the new hospital. A much appreciated change. I had plenty to do with 3 young ones and a dilapidated house."

When a dear woman labors to write out instructions that her funeral sermon should be on John 3:16 at a time that she clearly felt so rotten the day before and she thought she was close to death, who am I to deny her? **For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.**

Elaine understood the significance of this Gospel verse. “Look what I have to look forward to! (Heaven)” What a great Christian witness to all of us! She confessed her faith in Jesus, God’s Son, who was given on the cross for the world, for her, so she would not perish in death but have eternal life. Elaine reveals to us what used to be described as “dying well.” Our lives and deaths are in God’s hands; He is the One in control of that, not us. But what we do have control over is the manner in which we die, not that we get to choose the time and circumstance of our deaths, but to die confessing our faith in God.

This is what we pray for in the seventh petition of the Lord’s Prayer, **but deliver us from evil.** “We pray in this petition... that our Father in heaven would deliver us from every evil of body and soul, property and honor, and finally, when our last hour has come, grant us a blessed end, and graciously take us from this vale of tears to Himself in heaven.” In her life, Elaine had to endure much suffering and many losses, but she kept the faith in Jesus who died and rose for her; she died well with the sure and certain hope of everlasting life because of God’s love for her. “Look what I have to look forward to! (Heaven)”

As we were making make funeral arrangements, her family wanted me to remember with thanksgiving the great example she gave them in growing up: the family filling the pew in church every Sunday, church holiday, Advent, Lent, or whatever else was going on at church. This is what it meant for her to be a Christian – a life-long hearing and learning of God’s Word – which was something she also wanted for her family. For as long as she was able, she was here in church physically, and when she couldn’t be here, she “religiously” listened each Sunday to the radio broadcast. She read her *Portals of Prayer* devotion every night, and when she couldn’t do it any longer, had one of you read it for her.

On another scrap of paper she left behind was another Scripture passage written in her hand: **Teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom**, Psalm 90:12. The point of this verse is that all our days are in the Lord's hands. He made us and takes care of us; He saved us through His Son Jesus, and will take us to be with Him forever at the end of our days. To know and to believe this about God is to have a **heart of wisdom**. Elaine counted each day she had on this earth as one she had from God, who was her Wisdom. All of us should number our days in the same way and gain such wisdom!

Elaine also saved a page she ripped out from one of her *Portals of Prayer* devotions, dated Tuesday, January 4 – it doesn't say what year, but the paper has yellowed with age. At the top she wrote: "My funeral Service, EHC." The title of the devotion is "Never Forgotten" and the Scripture is, **I have summoned you by name; you are Mine. Isaiah 43:1** This served as the beginning of our Old Testament Reading for today, which slightly expanded is: **Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are Mine** (Is 43:1).

The devotion itself talks about cemeteries and those buried there, as well as the many unmarked graves of the dead. On the last day all the graves will be open, something Christians are looking forward to. We confess with St. Paul, **"For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain"** (Phil 1:21). A couple of verses later he writes, **"My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better."** Especially in the last year, it was Elaine's desire to depart and be with the Lord, not that she wanted to leave any of you.

In Eva's song, which you will hear in a minute, she expresses how you will remember Elaine forever. Today and the days to come will be full of memories. The *Portals of Prayer* devotion Elaine kept asks the question, "Will we be remembered?" What comforted her was that God would never forget her. "By our Baptism we belong to Jesus Christ! God reminds us, saying, 'I have summoned you by name; you are Mine.' ... We will never be forgotten by God."

God's love never ends. He gave His only-begotten Son to be our Savior. We give thanks today that God's love extended to Elaine, who will not perish in death, but be raised to everlasting life, just as she believed. Amen.