

Steel and Magnolia, God and Family
Homily at the Memorial Service for Gwen Cleghorn
Feb. 6, 2015
Trinity Presbyterian Church
Rev. John Cleghorn

I last stood here somewhere in the late 1970s on a youth Sunday, I believe. It is good to be back at my home church and to have the blessing of seeing so many of the faces of those who loved mom.

On behalf of our entire family, I want to begin by expressing our profound thanks for the many words of love, hope and caring you and so many others have expressed in these last days. We want to thank Ruth Marston especially for her constant care for mom in the last months.

Mom would love to see each and every one of you, to sit and ask you all about your lives and make each one of you feel as if you were the only one in the room, in her way of doing that.

I believe she is here in spirit, nonetheless. So, let us pray ... that I do not dangle a participle or split an infinitive or misuse the past pluperfect, lest the clouds part and a big red pen descend up on us or that I am snatched up into the heavens for one more gentle but firm grammar lesson.

I thought it might be fun to see who is here. So please stand - if able - if you knew mom from: Westminster? Wesleyan? Trinity School? The Atlanta Girls School? Trinity Church? More than one of the above? Somewhere else? Thanks

Mom's son-in-law Gerry Gibbs put it best this week. Mom stood for three things: God, family and education, in that order. We've heard Nancy and Jere tell us a little about her life in education. So let me talk about family and God.

As Nona said this week, many may think that mom is a product of Atlanta, but she is not. Her roots were far more humble. She, her brother and her sisters were raised on a family farm in the gently rolling land of northeast Mississippi. There they were shaped and formed by their parents.

Their mother, Ruby, was as lovely and graceful as she was tenacious and independent. All she ever wanted to do was to teach. So when Nolen Michael proposed to her, she said "yes" ... but she stipulated that the wedding would only occur after she went to college and spent at least one year teaching. Nolen waited for her.

As for Nolen, he was a great complement to Ruby. He was intelligent, industrious and enterprising and worked incredibly hard. He was loving and tough. In his 80s, a doctor examined him and asked when he had broken his back. Nolen said he didn't know he had. He just worked through it.

Many have described mom as a steel magnolia and the same description fits her sisters, Iris and Beth. They got the steel from their father and the magnolia from their mother. What they also got was a passion for education. It has become the family profession. My daughter Ellison will make the fourth generation of educators. Education drove mom. Mom left Mississippi for Atlanta to continue her own education at Emory.

The only thing that interrupted her untiring work for young people was her own family. After beginning at Westminster in 1954, she had me and Nona and taught at Georgia State at night, returning to Westminster full time in 1967.

For Nona and me, mom was mom. But she was never not an AP English teacher. We grew up with the usual voices and characters of childhood. The Officer Don Show, Andy Griffith, Bugs Bunny and others. She took issue with the pedagogy of Sesame Street, so we didn't watch much of that. But later came other voices – those of William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Walker Percy and William Shakespeare.

We didn't always understand at first. When something happened and neither Nona or I would take responsibility for it, mom would say in exasperation, "Well, I guess Puck did it." We later learned from our own classwork that Puck was a fairy in A Midsummer Night's Dream. When, as teens, Nona or I would try mom's patience, she recited lines from King Lear bemoaning his children's betrayal.

Later came mom's four grandchildren – all strong young women, as mom would have it. Saxon Ellison, Sophie Michaela, you are the reason mom never quit fighting. She wanted every moment she could have with you.

Mom's third family now encompasses much of Atlanta. As one of you wrote, so many of you are her spiritual children. She had a capacity for creating a bond with each individual student and those bonds never faded. She loved nothing more than to run into her former students. That was practically a daily occurrence. Her grandchildren know well the experience of going somewhere with Gramma and someone shouting out, "Mrs. Cleghorn!" A five- or ten-minute visit ensued and often the "student" was someone who was in their 50s, 60s or 70s.

But before mom was a mom or an educator, she was and always will be a child of God. Raised Baptist in Mississippi, she was predestined to become a Presbyterian when she came to Atlanta. Trinity Church was her only church here. She invested the sum of her faith here. Nona and I know every square inch of the original buildings and we often

joked that mom should just lock up the church because we were always the last to leave.

At the time of our parents' divorce in 1974, many a church might have quietly backed away from promoting a women in leadership. Instead, this church made her a trustee and clerk of session. What a vital affirmation! In her last weeks, we attended the memorial services of founding Pastor Allison Williams and the Elder and moral and physical giant, George Goodwin. While petite, mom stood shoulder to shoulder with those and other men – and women – in the building of this place.

Mom's faith was safe harbor in her many times of sadness, sorrow and disappointment. Her dinner-time prayer often quoted Psalm 139, a reassurance that there is nowhere we can go that takes us outside of God's loving arms.

I think mom was a Presbyterian also because of how our tradition lifts up the life of the mind. Probably knowing that I might need help today, mom left a list of a few favorite verses in the front of her Bible for me to find. Not surprisingly, they include the great commandment – “You shall love the Lord you God with all your heart, strength, soul ... and mind.” Another was Romans 12:2, God's direction through the Apostle Paul that we are to “transformed by the renewing of your mind ... that we may know what is that is good and acceptable and perfect in the will of God.”

Mom believed deeply that we serve God with the use of our minds. That is why chose the honored profession of becoming and educator.

But mom was many things in her faith. She sought to live out what another verse on her list calls “the abundant life.” And so she also included Philippians 4 in her list of favorite verses. It is a call for each of us to live our lives as good stewards of God's grace, the grace that was everything to mom, a comfort, a divine promise and a call to action in this world.

Philippians 4:8 gives us a vocabulary of faith – and I think mom would want us to take a brief moment to go over yet one more vocabulary list. It reads:

“Finally, beloved whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is excellence and there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”

These are the standards by which mom sought to live, never in perfection, yet always striving to reach them. They shape, form and inform how she sought to glorify God.

Whatever is true: Other Bible translation use the words “right” or “just.” Mom sought truth and encouraged the same in others. She pushed for what was right and just and held a special place in her heart for those who suffered injustice of any sort. One friend

recalled that mom knew what was right and, rather than pounding her fist on the table to achieve it, she nudged and prodded the rest of us until we recognized and achieved it.

Mom also believed it was right and just to practice good stewardship, to give God her first fruits. Trinity leader George Johnson learned of mom's practice of paying her annual pledge in advance in full for the coming year. He told her recently, "When I learned what you were pledging and that you paid it in advance, I went to a few of the big business leaders in our membership and told them that they needed to step up their game."

Philippians lists whatever is honorable – another translation of the Greek here is "honest." None of us is perfectly honest all the time. We are, after all, broken souls with limited capacity for self-awareness. Yet mom expected honesty and practiced integrity.

Whatever is pure: Rarely is something naturally pure. Purity is achieved through refinement. The great hymn "How Firm A Foundation" reminds us that dross must be consumed for something to achieve state of purity. Mom believed that anything, anyone could be refined – not in some artificial social sense, but in the sense that something good, something strong, something smart, something capable dwelt within all of us as gifts from God and was there as our purest form of being.

Philippians also notes whatever is lovely: Mom loved art and beauty as reflections of God's creation. She loved the high, artful worship here - the great and thoughtful preaching, the music of Norman McKenzie and Adele Dieckman and their choirs. She loved the symphony, which she attended loyally with some of you. And of course she loved literature. Mom was also nothing if not lovely herself, always put together, always beautiful, always "coifed" as a member of my church once said and ... always, always in heels, even at Disneyworld with her grandchildren or visiting the slums of Africa.

Whatever is commendable or praiseworthy: Mom was fed by her friendships. She loved to entertain and host great conversation at her home or just sit down one-on-one with a friend or student. Several of you said she had a way of just asking questions and, before you knew it, you were doing all the talking and she the listening. In this, she wanted to know all that you were doing that was commendable and worthy of praise and thanksgiving to God.

Finally, whatever is excellent: Commitment to excellence was mom's standard personally and for all the students and institutions she touched. So many of you whom she taught have written that she would not let you go until you had learned to write the perfectly constructed sentence or essay. She also gave her life to excellence in institutions, chiefly those that worked for the common good. As her dear friend George Overend wrote in a note to the Trinity School community this week, mom "set a new high water mark" for leadership.

So many of you this week have offered in writing other words about mom: Poised, gracious, mentor, friend, inspiration, compassionate, tireless, a gentle general.

Ed Helms, who knew her growing up here at Trinity and was one of her students, wrote this week, "She had the softest voice of almost anyone I know, like a delicate bird, and yet she always conveyed tremendous strength and integrity and she got things done!"

Another former student of hers wrote this week that mom was, "A tough but caring teacher. She was the one educator who cared enough to fail me and help me turn it into a positive event. Without Mrs. Cleghorn I would not be the citizen, father, husband or man that I am today."

There are so many other words so many of you have written this week and they make up a lasting treasure to our children.

But mom would want God to have the last word so I leave you again with today's vocabulary list.

Truth. Honor. Purity. Loveliness. Praiseworthy-ness. Excellence. Think on these things ... and the peace of God that passes all understanding be in your hearts and minds through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

I am convinced that peace was mom's in the end. As I wrote to my congregation, in mom's last moments, she stirred from a semi-comatose state from medication, she opened her eyes, looked Nona and me in our eyes and silently mouthed "I love you." We returned her words of love and released her to God. She closed her eyes, breathed her last and shed one tear ... as she beheld the face of God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.