

Funeral – Philip Bernatz
October 11, 2010
Zumbro Lutheran Church
Pastor Vern Christopherson

Corene, Jan, Marcy, Mike, family and friends, grace and peace to you from the one who lived for us, who died for us, and who now claims victory over every grave, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

There's a pivotal time in the gospel of Mark when Jesus and his disciples are on the way to Jerusalem. Jesus has just informed them that the trip is not going to end well. In fact, he will be mocked and spit upon and killed. After Jesus makes this prediction, two of the disciples—James and John—start asking if they can have the best seats when Jesus comes in glory. Isn't it ironic, Jesus is talking about laying down his life for the sake of the world and his disciples are squabbling over which one of them is the greatest.

Finally Jesus has heard enough. He says to them: “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

We have lost a great man this past week. The truly ironic thing is this: Phil would have been the last person to claim such an accolade for himself. Even though Phil was a brilliant thoracic surgeon, even though he had an international reputation, even though he'd published upwards of 175 scholarly articles, even though he had developed a number of surgical devices and techniques, to family and friends and colleagues, he was just ordinary Phil. He was humble, kind, generous, unassuming, and modest to a fault.

Phil seemed to understand Jesus words about being a servant a lot better than James and John ever did. That's probably why he picked the hymn, “In the Cross of Christ I Glory,” to sing at his funeral. Now granted, Phil only wanted to sing two verses of the hymn. He thought that two verses of most hymns was plenty. Still, the hymn selection was Phil's way of saying that his hope wasn't based on *his* greatness; it was based on *Christ's* greatness.

Such a mindset didn't develop out of thin air, of course. It probably had a lot to do with his upbringing. Phil was born in Decorah, Iowa on April 18, 1921. His dad, Frank, was the town butcher and grocer. His mother, Martha, was a stay-at-home mom. Both of his parents worked tirelessly to care for the family. Phil was fond of saying that his mom used to get up at 4:00 in the morning to make cinnamon rolls. She also cooked for days on end to get ready for large family gatherings at Thanksgiving and Christmas. As Phil watched his parents work hard and make sacrifices—even though he didn't know it at the time—he was learning lessons about greatness.

Phil did well in school. He did so well, in fact, that he skipped a couple of grades along the way. He was particularly passionate about football and basketball. His basketball team once had a chance to qualify for the state tournament. The game came down to the last few seconds. Phil was on the free throw line. He had two shots to clinch the game. He missed both of them. And he never forgot it. Later he would recount that story often and with characteristic humility. It's probably true what they say: losing defines us just as much as winning does. Even though we don't know it at the time, it teaches us valuable lessons about greatness.

Phil did his undergraduate work at the University of Iowa. And then he went on to earn a doctorate in medicine at the University. His education was interrupted by World War II. Phil put his medical skills to work in the Marines while stationed for eight months in China. Sometime later Phil was asked to do a second stint of service in Korea. Phil was surprised by this second call-up, but he served willingly. He used to joke that he was Hawkeye Pierce of M*A*S*H* claim to fame, only without the girls. These tours of duty came at a crucial time for our nation. And even though Phil didn't know it at the time, they provided valuable lessons on greatness.

Somewhere in the middle of Phil's medical schooling, he was introduced to a young woman named Marilyn. Phil was a resident at the Gunderson Clinic in La Crosse. Marilyn was a medical secretary. She had spotted him working at the clinic. A good friend of Marilyn just happened to be the hospital operator. She kept Marilyn informed—whether she was supposed to or not—every time his girlfriend from Iowa called. One day the friend pushed Marilyn, “She's still calling. Don't you want to go out with him?” Marilyn hesitated, “Well, you know, I've never dated a red-head before.”

Eventually these two did get together. On their first date they went to a football game. Marilyn was in a dress and high heels. And it snowed...a lot. Everything worked out, though. They were married in December of 1949.

The couple spent some time in San Diego as part of Phil's military service. Jan came along and enlarged the family. After his discharge, Phil received a job offer in San Diego. Marilyn would have loved to stay, but Phil's ties to the Midwest were too strong. He applied for a fellowship at the Mayo Clinic. The family moved to Rochester in 1955. They bought a home on 13 Ave NE. Pretty soon Marcy came along, and then four years later came Mike.

In 1961 the family built a home on Mary Hill SW. They settled into a comfortable rhythm of work and school and church and play. As you might imagine, Phil was very busy at work. Still the family managed to have breakfast and dinner together almost every day. That meant the kids had to get up at 6:00 in the morning and Marilyn had to turn down the pot roast until dad got home in the evening, but somehow they pulled it off.

The kids might have wished for more time with their dad, but they made the most of whatever time they did have. On Saturdays they always woke up with a note from dad and a list of chores to do. Phil carved out time to spend with each of the kids. Jan remembers a trip to Chicago with her dad. Marcy remembers going to the Boundary Waters. Mike remembers going fishing and golfing. These were good times. These were opportunities for this highly skilled, accomplished medical doctor to spend some time with his kids. And even though he didn't know it at the time, he was learning some valuable lessons about greatness.

There are many memories of Phil that we could share today: his insistence that interns refer to patients by name and not simply by number; Marilyn dying of ovarian cancer in 1981; the chance to love again when Corene came into the picture; the sheer delight of grandchildren; the joy of watching Phil crack up at his own jokes long before the punch line. There are many things to remember. There is a lifetime for which to be grateful.

I first met Phil in August when I stopped by the house for a visit. I was coming to bring communion. When he opened the door, he started apologizing immediately for

taking so long to get there with his walker. We sat down to talk. I soon saw many of the traits we've been talking about today: kindness, gentleness, humility, modesty. I also got a sense that Phil was tired, tired of struggling, tired of not feeling well, tired of not getting better. As I drove away, I found myself wondering how long he would still be with us.

And now we know. When it comes time to say goodbye, we feel sadness inside. We have lost a great man. We have lost the one we called husband, dad, grandpa, and friend. Even as we say goodbye, however, a part of us might be relieved. Phil's not tired anymore. He's not struggling anymore. He's not dying anymore. No, today we commend him to God's eternal care. We trust that Phil is glorying in the cross of Christ. Christ is saying to him, "Well done, good and faithful servant, well done; enter into the joy that is prepared for you." And if we look closely enough, we can maybe see Phil with a look of surprise on his face. He didn't know. He didn't know how great he was. He only knew how great Christ was. Amen.