

Greetings to the people of the resurrection,

### **SCRIPTURE**

Philippians 1:20 (CEB) – Larger reading: Philippians 1:12-26

*“It is my expectation and hope that I won’t be put to shame in anything. Rather, I hope with daring courage that Christ’s greatness will be seen in my body, now as always, whether I live or die.”*

### **STORY & OBSERVATION**

This story/observation was written back in 2010 and has been edited slightly to updated. I share it in the hope that it will touch someone’s life, cause you to reflect on your life and have meaning as you are on your Faith Journey:

The phone rang. It was 1:34 pm Sunday afternoon. Usually a call in the afternoon is something a pastor doesn’t normally dread. It is the calls that come after midnight that sends shivers down ones spin, but this was Sunday afternoon – unusual in itself, but just something to take in stride. It was Norma.

I’d been expecting a call from Norma since Friday. She had been in the hospital and when I called her husband’s cell phone to check on her the call went to voice mail which wasn’t all that unusual, but it was Norma who called back to inform me that Rick had come to visit her. He was acting a little abnormal, so much so that the hospital staff encouraged him to go downstairs and be seen by the ER staff. The last part of our conversation that day was, “Call me when you know something about Rick.” “Okay I will. Thanks for calling.” So when Norma called on Sunday I expected just an update on Rick.

After the normal greeting there was a long pause ... “Rick passed away this morning of a heart attack.” I sat in stunned silence. Rick had had two other heart attacks over the course of his young life. Rick was only in his mid-40s. What do you say to a woman who is fighting terminal cancer, who has two young boys, has limited income since both of them had lost their jobs, still unpacking from their move back to St. Petersburg and now has lost her emotional and physical support system in the death of her beloved husband?

I first met Rick Kelly when I became as the Associate Pastor at St. Luke’s United Methodist Church, St. Petersburg. He was in foster care and he was a hand full. He had strong opinions on whatever we were going to do in the youth department and a mouth to back it up. All the chaperons knew that if trouble took place on any outing or Sunday evening one of three boys were behind it ... Rob, Richard or Rick ... and sometimes all three. They required and demanded the “patience of Job” as the saying goes. But, I moved on and so did Rick.

Rick moved on to the Marines. Then to California as a police officer and businessman, he owned and operated a security business. Eventually Rick moved back to Florida and our paths crossed once again at a reunion of the former youth from the St. Luke’s church. It was just a chance meeting so I thought. Rick came to the reunion with his new wife,

Norma, their adopted son Christian and a bundle of energy called Mickey – the little boy that they were in the process of adopting.

Norma was in much pain during the day. Nobody knew it at the time, but the back pain was a result of growing cancer along her spine. The care of the two boys fell to Rick and he showed tremendous patience. I was both amazed and blessed ... and wondered when did he grow up to become such a caring and gentle man?

A short time after the reunion a call came that Norma was in the hospital and I was asked if I would go by and visit since it was in Sarasota ... just down the road from my home. Thus, began our recent journey together. A journey of pastoral care, counseling and support.

I discovered that Rick had a deep love for his wife and their two boys. He was managing to care for all three, as well as pack-up everything to move the family back to St. Pete where Rick's adoptive parents and siblings lived. He needed their support as he provided the care required by Norma. Besides, this would allow Christian, their oldest son, to get back into a school that he enjoyed and was very familiar with.

Rick was a caring husband and a devoted father. He cooked their meals, cleaned the house, as well as decorated it (probably with the help of a long time friend Tracy, also from the St. Luke's youth group) and set about developing a routine for the family to follow. If anything can be said about Rick it is that he tried. He worked hard to provide a secure foundation for the family. Did he always succeed? No, because Rick, like most of us, had a few demons that he was still trying to deal with. Most of the time he was successful in controlling them, but not always as his multiple marriages will bear testimony to along with a day here or a day there that kind of got lost in the process. Actually, he was kind of funny as he would stop, close his eyes and concentrate on how to adequately communicate correctly – to say what he was feeling instead of transferring the issue with a "you" message. He really was trying and was succeeding most of the time.

There were some things that Rick loved besides his wife and family. He loved the Tampa Bay Rays baseball team. As they go into the playoffs Rick would be approaching a level of excitement that wouldn't be matched by many. When the Rays games came on the TV his world stopped ... and everyone in the family knew not to disturb him until the game was over. Often his Facebook entries were coaching suggestions for Madden – not always so kind suggestions at that. Rick also like to go to the gym. It might have been the Marine in him, but it was during those workouts that he was able to deal with his frustrations that could build up within. Rick also worked at getting his family to church and Sunday school come Sunday morning. He wasn't too sure about the Sunday school class, just too much personal sharing going around which he was a little uncomfortable with ... but he went nevertheless.

During this time there are two articles on the Internet about Rick Kelly. One was a reprint of a St. Petersburg Times, "The Accidental Dad". This was recently reprinted in Reader's Digest. The other article spoke to the fact that Rick was one of the Marines stationed at

Camp Lejeune who developed breast cancer because of the poison in the water system. The article was titled: "Poisoned Patriots". Rick had been flown to Washington DC on a couple of occasions to speak before congressional meetings about his experience and his cancer.

My life will continue. The routine of the day-to-day activities won't change a whole lot, but a hole has been created by the untimely passing of a young man who was working really hard at becoming all that God had created him to be. Rick's heart just couldn't go on any longer, but his memories will as will the legacy he left in Norma, Christian and Mickey ... and the S.L.U.M Rats of St. Luke's. Norma finally was defeated in her fight against cancer almost 2 years after Rick's passing. Christian and Mickey are in the loving hands of Rick's siblings.

Experiences such as Rick's has taught me never to "sugarcoat" or "dance around" the subject of life and death. I know that people expect, want, desire an upbeat message of hope and the promise that everything is going to be okay. That's not fair to anyone ... and it would be a lie. The best I can offer is that which is found in scripture "whether I live or die" to God be the glory and that either in life or in death God will be with us.

Sometimes that particular message is hard to take because we deeply desire for our loved ones always to be with us as did Norma had concerning Rick. I would sit for hours in her hospital room and talk about life. She deeply depended on Rick always being there. I would listen. Evidentially, moving the conversation to the greater reality that none of us have the promise from God that we will always be there for the ones we love. But, the truth of the matter is this: God will be... no matter what. In life or in death may God be praised.

That was the message that I shared with the family and friends of Rick when we gathered for his memorial service. It remains the greatest message that any pastor can ever share with grieving loved ones. God is always there as will the spirit of our loved one ... and we celebrate those memories and rejoice in the hope that God brings.

### **QUOTE**

(one of my favorite quotes): "*Let us endeavor so to live that when we come to die even the undertaker will be sorry.*" - Mark Twain

### **PRAYER**

Life and death ideas are never easy to deal with, but God of grace and mercy give us the assurance of your presence that as we approach that day when we or our loved one won't be with us any longer life continues because you are present. Thank you for loving us that you have given us the promise of Eternal Life and the promise that you will never leave us. Amen.

And the faith journey continues, Pastor Jim  
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