

Robert (Bob) George Thurman
Monday, November 2, 2020

When a pastor is honored by a grieving family with the choice of Gospel lessons to be read at a member's funeral, it is a task that cannot be done alone. So, one invites the Holy Spirit to go along to the well of wonderful and descriptive Bible passages that might help folks reconnect their loved one with the universal witness of God's love in Holy Scripture. As I thought about Bob, there was an avalanche of words that came immediately to mind.

But soon, there were only two passages left to vie for the prize of being "Bob's Gospel." I'd like to share them both. The first one is from Matthew's 5th chapter - the continuation of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, which we heard yesterday on All Saints Sunday, as Bob's name was read into the list of all the saints in light, with the tolling of the bells. The Sermon on the Mount begins with the beatitudes, blessings, and these verses follow:

"You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

Bob Thurman heard those last words over 90 years ago, when he was baptized at St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Kansas City and claimed by God as his child forever. So, it is these two images that say **Bob Thurman** to me. "Salt of the Earth" and "Let your Light shine..." That is who Bob was born to be - salt of the earth: good, solid, faithful and true. Someone you could always depend on, someone who you could always believe was telling you truth that he had lived, and learned, and had no qualms about sharing.

Bob grew up on the church, and was confirmed 80 years ago tomorrow, on November 3, 1940 at Christ Lutheran, also in KC MO. He loved shining the Light of God into dark places and finding the answers to problems, struggles and puzzles. And Bob never left you without one great piece of advice - about whatever it might be that you had been talking about. And he always did it with that warm and genuine smile.

That light was also a twinkle in his eye - especially when he harbored secret knowledge that he could have some fun with. When we moved here to Kansas, I was excited to have a spot in my backyard where I could plant flowers to cut and enjoy. So I was chatting with Bob about what I could use to fill in the spaces between my flowers in my just-getting-started garden. He brought me a couple of bags full of something called lemon balm, along with directions for planting and care. For those of you who garden, you know that once lemon balm takes hold, it is totally out of control. I wish I had read his handwritten instructions **before** I filled my garden with it. I might have noticed the warning about how fast it spread if I didn't stay on top of it. I'll bet Bob is snickering right now, that some 30 years later, I'm still pulling patches of lemon balm, and recalling one of Bob's favorite pieces of advice: *"If all else fails read the directions."*

Tim shared with me that his dad always had a solution. It was the engineer in him. His brain would contemplate different outcomes in processing a problem. He was methodical (and apparently his grandson is the same way, according to his teachers!)

But Bob balanced his intellectual prowess with solid, 'salt of the earth' practices that worked for him for his whole life. Again, Tim likened his dad to that soldier that came to Jesus to ask for healing for his slave. "Just say the word and it will be as you say." Bob lived by the rules and knew how to balance faith and works. He was as honest as the day is long – consistent in the things he knew to be true: Family. Worship. Tithing. Bob was generous with his time, his talent and his treasure.

And he loved to advise – his workers - his sons – his pastors – his wife. Nellie used to say she was afraid he would manage her and the house like his work when he retired. He didn't...but he certainly shared his knowledge around here – faithfully and methodically, and always with an inner joy that just needed a little encouragement to come out into the open. You'd see it when Bob was around the preschool kiddos, or enjoying a beautiful day, or even chasing the geese away from the parking lot with his car. Bob. Salt and Light.

Many of you worked alongside Bob around here, helping with special jobs that he did, and we all know we can get each other to recall Bob with a smile with two words: septic tanks. He would come in from working outside at the church – always wearing a gray hoodie with the hood up over his cap. He'd saunter in to say hey to the office staff. I'd come out of the office and either Wendy or I would say, "Bob, wanna cup of coffee?" Sure, if it's already made." Never convinced him that with a Keurig a cup of coffee is always made... He'd sit. We'd chat. He'd make us smile.

Coffee was very important to Bob. One of our members tells the story of how Bob always took it upon himself to clean up the coffee pots out in the narthex after church. One Sunday this well-meaning member began to help out, and was so bold as to add soap into the coffeepot to give it a good cleaning. Well, Bob made it very clear that never, under any circumstances, was one to add soap to a coffee maker of any kind. End of story. Good advice shared. Salt and light.

Earlier I mentioned another gospel story that I wanted to share today. You can see why Jesus' words about salt and light fit who Bob was in our midst. But the second passage was his request – to be read at both his beloved Nellie's service and at his own. It's from John, the 11th chapter, and it's not about Bob as much as it is about the One who loved Bob. *Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."*

While Bob and Nellie were with us, they were our saints who taught us, by their lives, how to be disciples of Jesus. In September, Bob turned 94 years old (on the feast day of St. Michael and All Angels, which I used to kid him about, being Bob, the Angel.) To have suffered the losses and hard times that they endured with such grace and without losing faith was almost miraculous. For how could they still believe, how could they keep their faith in the face of the great Depression, Naval service during World War II, the loss of their daughter, Cathy, to an institution at a young age, and the hardships of their final years as members of The Greatest Generation. But Nellie and Bob believed that Jesus is who he said he is – and that Resurrection and Reunion is only the beginning of a new life of rejoicing together in their eternal home.

Going through Bob's intentions for his end of life, I ran across this prayer card. I don't know where it came from, but it was important enough for him to save. *"May the angels lead you into paradise; may the martyrs come to welcome you and take you to the holy city, the new and eternal Jerusalem. May choirs of angels welcome you and lead you to the bosom of Abraham; and where Lazarus is poor no longer, may you find eternal rest."* Rest well, good and faithful servant. Your travels have ended. But be assured that whenever stories are told around your family and friends and Advent - Nellie and Bob, Bob and Nellie - will figure prominently in them all. But for now, Welcome Home. Amen.

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