

"DEATH IN A FAMILY"

A Sermon Preached By
Dr. Lee C. Moorehead
March 10, 1974

THE FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

501 HOWE STREET

GREEN BAY, WISCONSIN 54301

D E A T H I N A F A M I L Y

In grateful, loving tribute to
Bill, Normagene, Kathy, Russ, Dave, and Steve

** ** *

There is no preacher on this earth who has anything authentic to say who does not derive his most vivid witnesses from the lives of people who experience and practice the verities of the Christian faith. I want to share with you the witness of a family which has recently passed through a seemingly bottomless valley of shadows and suffering.

This family is very near and dear to our family. We got to know them when Bill Warner, the father, came to be my ministerial partner on the staff of the First United Methodist Church in Carbondale, Illinois, in June, 1969. Quickly we found in them the kind of family that drew our love. In working with Bill for three years on the church staff I never ceased to marvel at his geniality and good humor. Never once have I met him in an ugly mood, never have I heard him utter an ugly word. When we moved away from Carbondale our Tim suffered a severe loss because Steve Warner was his closest friend. Constantly they talked back and forth on the phone and our long distance charges rose out of sight. Then last fall Steve was struck by a serious ailment, causing us great concern. He developed an acute sinus infection, spending a long period in Barnes Hospital, St. Louis. Eventually a somewhat radical surgical procedure had to be undertaken to relieve a dangerous pressure on his brain. At last he was able to return to his home in Carbondale to begin a period of recuperation. But it was not long before he was struck by savage headaches. Returning again to Barnes Hospital for further diagnosis it was discovered that he had a brain tumor. The tumor was located in the worst possible place, at the base of the cerebellum which controls all bodily movements, speech, sight and hearing. The amazing conclusion was reached that there was no connection between the sinus affliction and the tumor. Further surgery was necessary. It would be the most serious and delicate surgery imaginable. Early in December, 1973, on the weekend before his surgery, our Tim flew to St. Louis to visit Steve. Tim stayed all night with him in his hospital room. On Sunday Tim returned to Green Bay and then we set ourselves to wait out the dreaded day of surgery.

The surgery spanned eleven hours. At first there was hope that a miracle of recovery was in the offing, but presently it was disclosed that the tumor was malignant. The Warner family then began the most prolonged ordeal of anxiety and anguish that I have ever known in my life. A great company of friends and church people joined in this prayerful vigil. Everything medically and humanly possible was done to save his life. On February 15, 1974, on his brother David's twenty-first birthday, William Stephen Warner died. He was seventeen years old.

Betty, Tim and I began almost at once a long and sorrowful journey, 600 miles distant, to Carbondale. On February 18 in the sanctuary of the church where his father and mother had been married, some twenty-seven years before, and where his sister had been married in 1972, where his father had ministered, and where Steve had worshiped and served during an important segment of his life, a large crowd of family, friends, and church people gathered to celebrate the life and death of Steve. It was a remarkable service. The church youth choir of which Steve had been a part sang "Long Live God" from "Godspell." The high school chorus of which Steve had been a member sang a selection from "Jesus Christ Superstar." A woodwind quintet from the high school offered a Debussy number, "Arabesque," the high school band ensemble (Steve had been drum major of the marching band) played Bach's "Chorale Prelude," the combined choirs sang Handel's "Since by Man Came Death," and the service closed with a number that Steve had once directed himself, "The Blessing of Aaron," by Ramsey. Scripture readings and prayers were offered by the Rev. Robert Krause and the Rev. Dr. Paul Sims, and it fell to me to speak about Steve. Then a long processional of cars drove ten miles away from the church, eventually onto an old country road and up a hill to a field that would soon be planted with a spring crop. From the edge of the field six young boys carried Steve's body down a wooded slope to a small cemetery overlooking a tree-lined lake. There his body was mingled with the earth from which he sprang, and with the grass and trees and flowers which would soon be blazing with the greenery of spring.

Steve Warner lived for 17 years, and he died. For everyone who knew him, and there were many, those were 17 years of joy and delight. One searches back through the most glorious imaginations of his childhood to capture and recapture the images that come nearest to describing Steve. In that beautiful childhood world peopled by pixies and elves, sprites and Peter Pans, one reaches out to catch a free spirit flying through the wondrous space, to hold him close and think of him as Steve Warner. Often he came to stay all night in our home and when he was there our lives were freshened with delight. One remembers that sly look that was often caught out of the corner of his eyes, and I used to tell him that he reminded me of a lovable fox - a fox mischievous and marvelous.

On the night before the funeral a small group of friends and family paid Steve the ultimate tribute by celebrating his life in the remembrances of unnumbered instances of his gay and puckish sense of humor. Fresh in the mind of his father were the incredible number of times in those last incredible weeks and months when Steve, mortally stricken, was able still to command that saving sense of humor with sparing words, mimicry and outrageous gestures. At the service I quoted from a letter we had received from Steve's mother. She shared with us an incident that occurred in the hospital. Someone in the family of another patient asked her one day if Steve had ever been normal. She said that she just smiled and said "Yes," but, confiding in us she wrote: "Inside I was screaming. Normal? Stephen? No, he was never normal. Wild? Yes. Exuberant? Yes! Sometimes heedless? Yes. Brilliant? Yes! (This week we got an announcement that his test scores had placed him in the top 3% across the nation.) Fiercely loyal? Yes! Independent and always stretching for more? Yes. But normal? No, I don't really think you could ever say Stephen had been normal. In that list of adjectives I left out 'loving' and 'caring' as well as 'ruthless' when bigotry and snobbery were involved, but I could not make a complete list of Steve's attributes if I took a lifetime. He was a joy always and it did not take this calamity to make us aware of it but oh - we should have enjoyed him even more." A parental evaluation like that is precious and timeless. When I read those words at the funeral, the large throng of friends made a remarkable response: they broke quite spontaneously into laughter - laughter healing and hopeful.

Those of us who know the Warner family know that there was a very special poignant beauty in this event. A warmer, more beautiful and loving Christian family I have never known. An earthly shrine of this family beauty is the home they built together, literally laboring together in its construction.

- This home was shaped in their common dreams;
- it was mortared and mortised with their love for each other
- it was nailed into strength and solidity by their faith
- now that home, which is so much more than a very special house, has been tested to the absolute limits by a midwinter's storm of almost unprecedented fury. But I think Jesus spoke of their kind of home when he told about someone "Who had sense to build his house on rock. The rain came down, the floods rose, the wind blew, and beat upon that house; but it did not fall, because its foundations were on rock."

Stephen Warner was, indeed, an extraordinary boy whose death diminishes all of us. No one need send to know for whom the bell tolls today. This gathered throng silently declared that it tolls for us all.

** ** *

In our contemplation of his death there is surely one irrepressible, towering question: Why? Why? Let no one arise to offer a cliché-ridden explanation, let no one come forth with well-worn phrases, no conventional wisdom. Let us not be given stock answers, for none of us can bear the tyranny of triviality. Steve's family agonized over these questions. Steeped in the Christian faith, grounded in the great truths by which men have lived for years, this family in its deepening and spreading ordeal groped and grasped for answers. During those days of waiting and watching Steve's mother recorded her anguish in letters to us. I share the following with you:

This A.M. in the hospital chapel I felt my mute scream - O God, if I just believed you bargained with man, I'd lay my life at your feet right now. As much as I've always abhorred the thought of dying, I could happily say, "Lord, I've had 50 good years, so here I am - use me as a substitute. . . In black negative blocks I feel the building shake with the wind or the traffic and I think - maybe the building will collapse and we'll all die before we have to face Tuesday. . . I find I wished I believed in anointed handkerchiefs, prayer that reverses the film on an X-ray plate, and that whatever I believed and asked for, would somehow come to pass. Somehow I can only pray for unfearing hearts, steady hands on the crew, unerring precision and decision, souls strong enough to stand what is laid on us, a brave enough spirit to be supportive in whatever fashion he needs and a confidence or faith that will prevent me from being bitter or shriveled. Somehow that list looks so long. It looks like it would be easier for God just to pluck it out, doesn't it? . . . I like to think that God comforts him, for I have always believed we cannot drift beyond his love and care. But Stephen seems in his pitiful weakness to be forsaken. . . I cannot think of a surer way to drive a young man completely mad than to have things fall on him with the unrelenting savageness with which this has hit Steve. I can find no answer nor solace in anything other than - it has happened to thee and to thee, so why not to me. . . I know David, too, is having a struggle with faith and is at

a point where Sartre makes as much sense as the theologians; So, Lee, if you can write any answers for us we are in need of some.

The last note we received from Normagene was written on notepaper that was imprinted with the image of a butterfly perched on a gold leaf from an oak tree. Around this leaf she wrote the words: "When we came (to the hospital) the leaves were green, then yellow, then orange, then fallen, and now ice and snow covered." During their long vigil in that hospital the seasons of the year did change: Christmas came, then New Year's, then Valentine's Day, then Steve's death. But during these days the lives of the Warners were changing, too. Out of the depths of their hearts their witness came. David gave me a letter that he had written to his brother, Steve, shortly after that first dreadful surgery. Steve never read that letter, but Dave allows me to share it with you:

Dear Stephen,

The last few months have been hard on all of us, but I can't imagine the physical pain and emotional strain this has placed on you. Since October 10 I have faced the possibility of your death several times and can't let my mind imagine life without you. It is difficult to accept my life without the companionship, friendship and love that have made my life enjoyable. Whenever I'd think of times in the future if you would die, I keep catching myself thinking, "But things will be back to normal when Steve comes back." I couldn't really imagine life without you, only if you were gone on a long trip - but not dead.

I have to admit that you've been gone so long that at times it almost seems like you have died. Life continues, the regular grind of school, work and chores keeps life going and covers the fact that you are gone. But gnawing away at my stomach and the back of my mind is the truth that you are suffering and not with me.

I had not known the meaning of brotherly love until the past two years or so. About the time we moved to Carbondale, or a year or so later, we grew closer and closer until we became friends, companions, comrades as well as true brothers instead of just "siblings."

I wish I could have suffered for you because you have suffered too much. You have gone through much pain and suffering with the frontal sinusitis and polyps. But if you had not had this, the brain tumor would have gone undiscovered and soon after you would have died. This

way, you are alive, and recovering from the surgery. You may still have a long way to go before you can again enjoy life to its fullest, but you will attain this goal. At this point I don't know, no one knows, what permanent impairment you may have, if any, but let me say, blind, uncoordinated men can enjoy the taste of a fresh mountain stream and appreciate the complex beauty of nature and all of God's creation. All obstacles can be overcome and you have the strength and courage to overcome them. I pray that God will aid you in any way possible in this fight and that he can make me useful in helping you recover. I long for the time we can again enjoy a field of winter wheat under a blue sky, with a taste of spring water on our lips and a pleasant feeling of aching, tired and successful muscles in our limbs.

These days cannot be far away if we work to overcome your illness.

God has granted my prayer that you survive the operation with a sound mind and now we must fight for recovery and accept any infirmities that cannot be overcome. Let us remember always that our prayers were not forgotten, for you live, and may we thank God for this.

As I look on you now, wild-eyed, fearful, bony, shaved and partially paralyzed, I can't help but long for the past when you were whole. But the alternative to being sick now is death. So we must struggle on to recovery.

Now I can live a life with you around, even if you were to be confined to a wheelchair, which I don't expect, but I could not live a full life if you were to die.

These thoughts are always on my mind these days, and sometime, I will have you read them or tell you my feelings while we overlook a valley of grasses as the wind appears in waves across the floor of the valley.

But for now they remain trapped in my heart and on this page. May we soon be together once again.

As I have read that letter over and over again I am reminded that: "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love." (I Cor. 13:12,13)

The preciousness of this family's love for each other was shown in still another vivid way. Normagene obviously is gifted with a beautiful imagination and a poetic pen. During those long hours that stretched into days and months at the hospital - they could visit Steve in the intensive care unit only for short intervals - she spent much time writing out her thoughts and feelings. Again, I asked, and received, permission to share the following:

The name of the gift shop in the East Pavilion of Barnes Hospital is "The Wishing Well." In this highly sensitized state I'm living in, where I see symbolism in every word or phrase, this in itself is a wry misnomer. When the kindly ladies from The Wishing Well - that fabled place of wishes granted and dreams come true - ask "May I help you?" I must always repress the jarring reply "O Yes, I've come to have my son made well, if you please, Ma'am" and say instead, "Is the 69¢ jar the only size you have?" This week The Wishing Well is featuring a pair of cuddly Teddy Bears locked in close embrace - the red one is hugging the bejabbers out of the white one (God, they were featuring the turning of the autumn leaves when we came and now it's Valentine's Day...) and the white one is kissing a red plush cheek. How delightfully cunning, how endearing until one sees the startling tag "TO DETACH SIMPLY UNSNAP THE FASTENERS". Then I see that the simulated affection is caused by gripper snaps strategically placed in paws and body fur. "UNSNAP TO DETACH."

I know the medical staff must have a certain area of detachment in order to efficiently do its work. I haven't wanted anyone operating on Steve with tear-dimmed eyes, but how glad I am for the ones who still risk the ache that inevitably comes with identifying with our beautiful dying Stephen. There are a few nurses who have held me as I wept, and a few whose tears have mingled with mine and they somehow give me a little hope in this whole unreal, cock-eyed hopeless experience. There is a bond that holds us together as human beings - there is a standard - someone cares. It is frightfully important to me that human beings still weep and rage at injustice and unfairness. Some of the nurses and more of the doctors have successfully built a wall around the deep place of the heart so they are not

vulnerable to the agonies they see. These are the ones who have been with Steve the same number of shifts as the others, and yet I do not know their names. When we meet in the hall or share an elevator they look the other way or avert the eye just before recognition becomes necessary. Skilled professionals? I have no reason to doubt it, but they have detached the gripper snaps. They cannot know what a hand on the shoulder reached out in pity and remorse can mean - nor can they know until they subject themselves to vulnerability and pain by the risk of identity.

What are the bands of love? The glad affirmation that reassures me now is that they are as natural as the next breath and as constant as a heartbeat! Not to have wondered about them but just to have had them and accepted them is a testament to the depth and reality of those bonds. I've shuddered as I've heard mothers say, "Momma won't love you if you do that," for I've felt and told my children many times that nothing they could ever do could cause me not to love them.

And now I find that death itself cannot break those bonds of love. Detachment? Impossible! I could no more detach myself from Steve than I could remove my heart from my breast. Some persons find comfort in the euphemism "lost" as a substitute for the harsher "died." Now I'm surer than ever that "lost" is inappropriate. Lose Stephen? Never. He is inextricably bound in the hearts of each of us and will flow through us, enriching us forever. Shakespeare says, "Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds, Or bends with the remover to remove." The little teddy bears are literally cute but how meaningless is an embrace that depends on gripper snaps. Bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh, I am bound by the invasive fibers of love, and these are undetachable.

Whatever doubts or questions there might still be hovering over the life and death of Steve, one truth is magnificently manifest: Though love is a mystery, too, that never in this world finally yields its secrets, there never was a day in the life of William Stephen Warner when he did not know and experience love, when he did not know that he was loved. This was the ultimate gift given to him by his family, his church and his friends. He knew, too, I believe, that despite all of the torment and testing he was loved by God, for God is Love.

Kathy, Steve's sister who is a richly talented musician, expressed her love for Steve by being beautifully serene and steady in the last days of Steve's life. It was she who poured forth the lovely music of her spirit by arranging the details and making the liturgical selections for the service that celebrated Steve's life and death.

Bill, Steve's father, inwardly crushed by grief, towered above everyone in his most gracious capacity to bring comfort and hope to others. As a long line of Steve's youthful friends came to express a sorrow and sympathy for which they could summon only tears, not words, it was Bill who lovingly took them into his arms, bequeathing comfort and hope. Just over a week after we had departed from Carbondale we received a letter from Bill which contained these words:

I started back to work with a funeral yesterday afternoon and one this morning. The one today was particularly meaningful since it was for the wife of a man whom we met in St. Louis at the hospital. (These families had shared the long hours of anguished watching in the hospital waiting room.) He will need a lot of help in time to come since at this moment he cannot believe at all in God's existence. Following the scripture and prayer by his minister, I spoke briefly of our relationship in suffering. Then Roy himself read a eulogy he had written for his wife. It was all beautiful except for the last sentence which he shouted: "AND I AM NOT RESIGNED!" It is understandable, and I believe in the weeks ahead I can help him some. I want my next sermons to be on The Will of God. Have you anything to suggest? I am quite concerned that so many have had their faith shattered by Stephen's illness and death. I feel it important to confront this with a reasonable, acceptable concept and I can use your help.

Do I have anything to suggest? Bill needs my help? O God, there is not anything in all of the world I would not do to help him and his family, but it is he, it is they, who have helped me, beyond all measure and all articulation. The testimonies and witnesses I transmit from them to you are evidences of what they mean to me. Somehow throughout all of their haunting hurt, words that Normagene quoted in one of her letters shine upon my pathway, if but for only one footstep ahead. They are from the prophet Habakkuk:

Although the fig-tree does not burgeon,
the vines bear no fruit,
the olive-crop fails,
the orchards yield no food,
the fold is bereft of its flock
and there are no cattle in the stalls,
yet I will exult in the Lord
and rejoice in the God of my deliverance.
(3:17,18)

A death in a Christian family, then, has brought this witness. Let no one dare to minimize the pain and the sorrow. There is a great aching emptiness, a gnawing loneliness, a stinging separation that will not subside or go away. Every day begins with the fitfull beating of a broken heart. At night-time the soul cries out for a missing child. But heard, too, as a divine counterpoint, are the slowly, yet steadily rising sounds of another music, another voice, saying, "Let not your heart be troubled. . . in my Father's house are many mansions. . . I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you. Because I live, ye shall live also. . . Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid." (John 14:1,2,18,19-17) As we turned away that day from a newly opened grave on that wooded hillside overlooking a lovely lake, I knew that despite the death in this family an affirmation could not be suppressed. It whispered in the wind, it rustled in the trees, it shouted from our hearts: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom.8:35-39)