

Rick and Ellen

Today I'd like to tell you a story about two people who were transformed by God's love. They were members of the first congregation I served after I graduated from the seminary. We'll call the man Rick and we'll call his wife Ellen. Rick was a marine who had fought in the South Pacific during WW2. He was a tough guy and he wasn't easy to get to know. He pretty much kept to himself and he didn't take kindly to people who tried to cozy up to him. He was at church every Sunday morning but he made it clear that he wasn't interested in getting any more involved in the church than that. When we launched a fundraising campaign to build a new sanctuary Rick let me know right away that he had no interest in contributing. Judging from his regular attendance at church, it appeared that he took his faith seriously but it was hard to see it at work in his life. On the contrary, he seemed to be a very unhappy and cynical person. When Rick found out that he had fourth stage lung cancer and only a few months to live, he kept the news to himself. The only way I found out about it was that his brother-in-law called me to let me know that Rick was receiving hospice care. When I went to see him in the hospital I wasn't sure what kind of reception I would get. What I feared was that the prospect of dying would only increase his cynicism and turn him away from whatever faith he had. When I walked into his hospital room he was sitting in a chair and crying like a baby. Rather stupidly I asked, "what's wrong, Rick?" He cried out, "I'm not worthy; I'm going to hell." This was the first time as a Pastor that I had to deal with someone facing death. At first I didn't know what to say, but my mind flashed back to something they had told us at the seminary: that in difficult situations like this, God would give us the right words. So I said what came to my mind. I said, "well, you know something Rick? You're right--you're not worthy." He didn't expect me to say that, and his eyes got kind of big, but I continued, "and I'm not worthy and neither is anybody else worthy: that's why we have a Savior and that is why you're not going to hell." Gradually he stopped crying and wiped his eyes and his nose and just kind of sat there staring at the wall. I tried to get him to talk, but he wasn't interested in conversation so finally I said a prayer and left. I figured I had really blown it. The next day when I went up to see him again he was sitting in the same chair but there was a smile on his face—one that I'd never seen there before. He was cheerful and wanting to talk and asked me to tell him everything the Bible had to say about heaven. He said was looking forward to being there because he was sure that it would be, as he put it, "a damn sight better than this place has ever been." A few days later a friend of his from church went to visit him and called me afterward, saying, "what's happened to Rick? I've never seen him like this." "he's actually cheerful!" All Rick needed was to hear the Gospel one more time. He'd heard it preached from the pulpit all his life, but when the chips were down, he needed to hear it up close and personal.

You see, when people are on their deathbeds, the devil loves to remind them of all their sins—trying to convince them that they've sinned so much that they're unworthy of receiving God's forgiveness. They need to be reassured that God's forgiveness is greater than their sins. As Paul wrote, "where sin abounds, grace does super-abound." They need is to hear the gospel one more time. That's why it's so important for a pastor to be there when someone's dying. Rick died peacefully with complete assurance that he was going to heaven.

The other person I want to tell you about was Rick's wife--Ellen. Ellen, was even more cynical than Rick. She never expected anything good to come out of life and it rarely did. She didn't give a hoot about what other people thought of her: they could take her or leave her—she didn't care. If you made the mistake of asking Ellen how things were going she would tell you exactly how they were going—and you wouldn't make the mistake of asking her again. From what I was able to gather from her son, she had gotten more and more that way in the course of her lifetime. She was a real challenge to a Pastor because you like to see God's grace and mercy and peace at work in the people you've been called to serve, and they certainly didn't seem to be at work in Ellen. She was a hard case and it was tempting to leave her alone with her anger rather than have her take it out on me. But God kept chiding me: "you're a Pastor. You can't just leave people alone. Go see her." So about a week before Christmas, as we were preparing to go caroling at members' homes, i decided to take a chance and take the carolers by Ellen's house. There's strength in numbers, I told myself. Even so, I was a nervous about it because I thought there was a good chance that we might get a "bah, humbug" response and have the door slammed in our face. But when Helen opened the door and saw the carolers there, she broke down into tears. I could tell that she was deeply touched. We sang a few carols, gave her a plate of cookies, and wished her a blessed Christmas. She was still weeping when we left. For the first time I saw evidence of a needful heart beneath her brittle exterior. Less than a year after Rick died, Ellen found out that she had cancer. She went through chemotherapy and it drained her terribly but didn't stop the cancer from spreading. But as it spread, Ellen fought back. There was never any doubt about her strength and her mental toughness; she had a pioneer's determination to face down adversity and come out on top. If sheer stamina and will power had been enough, Ellen would have beaten the cancer that had invaded her body. But, of course, human strength is not enough for Ellen or for anyone else when the grim reaper has set his sights on you. So finally, Ellen was faced with the fact that she would soon be treading the verge of Jordan. Still, she was at the early service at church every Sunday. She would sit in the same pew, say the confession and creed, sing the hymns and come to the rail for communion. Her favorite hymn was, "what is the world to me?" There wasn't a spot of joy on her face, but she was there. Now there was an African-American gentleman in our congregation who went by the name of "Ike."

Ike was half black and half Cherokee, and since my great grandmother was Cherokee, we figured we were related. Ike had a great sense of humor. Once he called me and when I answered the phone he said, "this is your brother who your mama never told you about! "Anyway, Ike was a gregarious, friendly man and when he found out that Ellen was dying, before the service he would walk over to where she was sitting and ask her how she was doing try to kid around with her. He got zero encouragement from her but he kept on doing it anyway. As she got weaker, he would wait for her car to show up in the parking lot and then help her out of it and into the church, and then back out again when the service was over. When Ellen was put under hospice care in a hospital, Ike asked me if he could go along with me when I visited her. Actually, he didn't ask—he just told me he would be going along with me to visit her. When I would give her communion Ike would receive it right along with her. During the final month of her life, the sharp edges of Ellen's personality seemed to disappear. Her bitterness and anger dissipated and something else came to life in her. Something that resembled--well--grace and mercy and peace. Even when she griped about the food there wasn't much heart in it. The frown she'd worn for decades would dissolve into a smile and something like laughter would come into her eyes. Ike and I weren't the only ones who saw the change in Ellen: her son told us that he and his wife saw her laugh more in her final weeks than they'd ever seen her laugh before. As her body wasted away her spirits seemed to come alive. One of the last things Ellen said was to ask Ike if he would be a pall bearer at her funeral.

Folks, love comes from God—but it comes to us *through* other people. As good Lutherans we know that we are saved by faith and not by love. But if faith is like a mustard seed that grows into a large bush as Jesus said, love is the water that enables it to sprout and grow and blossom and bear fruit. If we in the body of Christ don't love others--who will? On the night before he was crucified, Jesus spoke these words to his disciples: "as the father has loved me, so I have loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's command and remained in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: love each other as I have loved you." God is always looking for ways to come to us with his love. He came to Ellen in the waters of her baptism when she was an infant. He came to her through word and sacrament every time she worshipped. Yet in spite of all the love he showered down upon Ellen, she grew bitter and cynical in the course of her life. But when the love of God came to her through Ike, she finally felt loved. And then God came to Ellen and took her home. We are not saved by loving others. But others can be saved through us when we love them. By loving others as God has loved us, we can be the means through which God comes to them with his love. And his love can kindle faith, and faith takes us to heaven. Amen.