

Precious in the Sight of the Lord

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Editor's note: This homily was delivered at the memorial service for Dr. Lila Bonner Miller. The homily helps us remember not only a remarkable woman but a generation whose virtues and piety she so well represented. Dr. Miller was the mother of Belle Miller McMaster, director of advanced studies at Candler School of Theology; Mary Miller Brueggemann, a minister of the United Church of Christ; and Patrick D. Miller, Jr., professor of Old Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary.

There is no escaping the loss and grief that are ours this morning in the face of the death of Lila Bonner Miller. But that is surely not the primary or dominant emotion in our hearts. For if ever there was a time for thanksgiving and praise, this is it. Her children, at least, and her grandchildren—and I am sure there are many more—know that our lives have been shaped and blessed and gifted beyond measure by the presence and the words and deeds of the one we call Mother and Grandmother and others call Lila and Dr. Miller. There was nothing more sure to her than the grace and providence of God in her life, and she has made that grace and providence sure for us. “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.” And she never did. I suppose somewhere along the way we came to realize that those words were not just something we had to memorize as we read and learned the 103d Psalm on Sunday afternoons in our childhood. They were the truth, they were the reality that sustains our lives. “Come, O children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord.” And she did, so that none of us can ever live apart from the fear of the Lord. For her patients as much as for herself and her children, the one thing she knew could be counted upon to uphold us in the face of everything else is the conviction that: “You are a child of God.” There was no therapy more effective and no motherly wisdom more important than that conviction.

While there is much to her life and work that stands out, I expect that nothing will remain with us more than our sense of her as someone who was always teaching.

If Mother was teaching us continually, it was only because she was herself always learning, always interested in new things, eager to read everything. In her small bedroom in her apartment, there were three bookcases, and books piled up all over the floor. As she grew older, she would often ask whoever was there among her children to come lie down on the bed with her and visit. That was fine, except there was usually very little room on the bed because books were littered all over it. At the age of eighty-six she visited us in Boston in the context of attending a continuing education seminar on neurology. She became a kind of theological groupie attending courses and lectures that Walter [Brueggemann] and I and others gave at various places. She poured over books on the brain and books on God, read nearly every book that Walter has written, no small feat. But she read her Bible and knew it better than any of the other books.

This unceasing desire to learn was manifest in various ways. It showed up in her openness to the new and to change. She was not afraid of change and taught us not to be. She said change was natural. What mattered was what you did with it. For one so steeped in the tradition of her faith and her family, she was truly open to new ideas

and unafraid to challenge the set ways and assumptions of the past. Her openness to the new was present even in such simple things as learning games. She loved games and was always eager to learn a new one. I think she was far more inventive for us in our childhood than we were later on for our own children. Mother could also get tickled and laugh so hard the tears rolled down. I think one of the most difficult things for me about her stroke at eighty-nine was that the laughter no longer came readily. She loved jokes but often did not catch on. Last night we remembered the time that we were playing that game where you think up a pair of rhyming words and give the others a definition to see if they can guess your rhyme—"stinky pinkies," we called them rather inelegantly. An obese feline, for example, would be a "fat cat." We were throwing these around right and left and guessing each others rhymes fairly easily. Mother finally jumped in and said, "I have one. It is something good to eat." We all came up with several rhymed words of something good to eat. But she just sat there shaking her head with this big grin on her face at our stupidity. Finally, in exasperation, we said, "We give up. What is it?" She smiled even more broadly and said, "Fried fish." She was so proud of having stumped her children and grandchildren that I don't think she ever realized that she had not caught on to the game.

But all of that was a part of her zest for life, something that we all will recall in many images: from her sitting on the bank of the Nueces River with a bamboo pole, to her stirring the fish she caught in a big skillet out in the hot Texas sun. She loved to eat—anything. All of us children have images of the Montreat porch or backporch literally covered with bushel and half-bushel baskets of fruit and vegetables after she had made a trip to the Farmer's Market in Asheville. Her grandchildren would sit fascinated as she ate her fried chicken, not only down to the bone but right on through, chewing up bones and all. And there are other images that tell us something about this woman and the kind of stuff of which she was made: curing half a hog on the back porch of the Druid Hills [Presbyterian Church, Atlanta] manse; gutting, skinning, and cutting up a deer when Mr. Parker brought one to the manse in San Antonio on the last day of deer season with just us three children to help her, only to find two hours later our father coming in with great pride with a deer and a turkey. They cleaned them both and twenty minutes later were on their way to a big wedding at First Presbyterian Church.

Her son-in-law, George [McMaster], properly saw in her last words to him a kind of parable of her life. When he told her it was time to go eat supper, she said, "Well, I need to do something!" One of her friends wrote to the family after her death that whatever the Communion of Saints has been up to until now, it is going to be different with Lila aboard.

Mother taught us all, directly and indirectly, by example and by instruction. She made us learn scripture and gave us rules for life from traditional proverbs, such as many hands make light work, to her own rules, such as everybody works and everybody gets an education. She took whatever measure necessary to get us to learn. One summer she offered me a quarter for every poem I would learn. With her grandchildren, she upped the ante. One summer she offered *five dollars* to any of them who would learn the books of the Bible. They learned them with alacrity, of course, but that wasn't the end of it. All their friends learned about this gold mine, went to their Bibles, and then came by the house to recite the books of the Bible and get their five dollars.

There were three particular areas where I think Mother was always teaching us:

For one, she taught us how to be women and men and to be men and women together. That was evident in her relationship with Father. How could two people be more different! But she was devoted to her husband, and we learned from that. She wanted her son to know the things that belonged to being a man—but to be careful. And she wanted her daughters to know and to do more than women often tended to do—but to be cagey. She took great pride in the achievements, the competence, and the commitments of her daughters, Belle and Mary, to their family, their work, and their church.

But her instruction was not confined to her daughters. New members of the family also came under her particular kind of tutelage. I remember a formative moment in our marriage relationship the first summer after Mary Ann and I were married and were visiting with the family in Montreat for a week. We were sitting around the table after lunch when Mary Ann said that she would like a cup of coffee. She then turned to me and asked if I would like one also. I said that I would. But as she rose to go get the coffee, Mother grabbed her arm, pulled her back down in her seat, and said, “Are you going to wait on him the rest of your life?” The lesson, of course, was as much for me as it was for Mary Ann.

That story is typical also of her assertive manner that was sometimes in your face but mostly to the point in ways that got to the heart of the matter. She was direct but rarely unkind. She said what she thought, and most of the time what she thought was something helpful, even if difficult for others to hear. On one of our last visits to her in the nursing home, when she had pretty much quit talking and would just sit there while we talked around her, I noticed that she had a copy of a book I had written recently—Mary, whose compassionate care of Mother over the last seven years is beyond what any of us will ever know, had gotten her the book. Always trying to get a response of some sort, I said, “I see you have my book.” No response. So I said, not really expecting any response, “What did you think of it? Then, after a brief moment, came a quiet, “Too long”—which was exactly the kind of direct and truthful response Mother always gave.

A second thing she taught us was to care about others and especially people in trouble or in need. The Druid Hills Community Fellowship, which she started, is the primary testimony to her care of others, and she never let any of her family visit on a Sunday evening without being roped in to participate and help out. Her medical practice was a further demonstration of her concern for the sick and suffering. Indeed her whole life was built on the assumption that you helped people who needed help. Hospitality to strangers was as natural to her as breathing. Belle recalled how during our years of growing up, there was never a Sunday dinner when there were not strangers at the dinner table, some of whom became friends. Surely Mother hears now the words of the king: “I was hungry and you gave me food...I was a stranger and you welcomed me...I was sick and you took care of me” (Matthew 25:35-36).

And finally, she taught us how to grow old. That, of course, was in a sense the whole point of the documentary, “Lila,” which was filmed when she was eighty. But there she was still a robust, active woman. I expect it was in these last seven years, as she lay in a nursing home after a major stroke, that she did her most important teaching about how to stay alive even when there is not much there, how to be human to the end. As long as she could, she kept reading; as long as she could she kept painting. On her last visit away from the nursing home, she stayed several days in our home in Montreat.

Every night, I would go in to check her as she lay in bed, and she would be reading and underlining her copy of Karl Barth's *Göttingen Dogmatics* until she fell asleep.

And till the end, she directed her heart and her mind to the one she knew above all else loved her and would hold her forever. At her burial, these words were read from Romans 14. Here Paul is surely speaking about Lila:

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.

In the years after our father died, Mother carried on as fully as ever, but she missed him beyond imagining. One verse came to be a sort of touchstone for her, and I heard her repeat it often in the apartment on Jamestown Road. It is from the 116th Psalm:

Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.

It was a kind of fundamental assurance to her, that the man she loved so dearly was even more dearly loved by her Master and was, beyond death, precious in God's sight. So now she leaves those words of the psalmist with us. It is fitting that the psalmist give the yea and amen to the life of this remarkable woman of faith, for the psalms were the voice that most clearly spoke for her. In her last months, her own voice was almost silent. Yet, three words returned again and again to her lips or were written over and over again on her pad—she always had a book, a writing pad, and her magnifying glass. The words were “trust and obey.” Those words are from an old hymn, of course, but they are at the heart of the life of faith as the Psalms proclaim it. At ninety-five, when it would seem that she could now simply let go, she was reminding herself of what it meant to fear the Lord. Trust and obey. She did that, and because she did, we will probably do so better than we would have had she not been among us.