

# The Journey Home – Brian Hartley

Embracing the Cross  
A Funeral Sermon for Arlene Greer Stephens  
2 Timothy 4:6-8  
Greenville Free Methodist Church  
December 20, 2008

Though we may not realize it, most of us spend a lifetime preparing for our death. From the moment when we first emerge from the womb, we are on an inevitable trajectory that leads towards our own demise. Yet, curiously, today we live in a mortality-denying culture where the “D-word” dare not speak its own name; where, as Kate Berridge has recently written, death has become taboo and bereavement a “shameful secret,” (Vigor Mortis: The End of the Death Taboo). The result has been a shifting of grief and mourning from the public to the private sphere, as well as the decline of a common Christian cultural tradition that recognizes the inextricable nature of the cycle of life and death.

In the midst of this huge shift over the course of the last several generations, the church has at times capitulated to the culture and tried to sweep death under the rug. We have been guilty, at times, of reducing the gospel to some kind of individual “get into heaven” transaction, with no implications for our present reality—excising from the very heart of that gospel the cosmic impact of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But, not so today. We are here as the community of faith to lay claim to that larger Christian tradition carved out by our Lord and Savior whose passion and death narrative, not just his life story, are the clear focus of the earliest Christian narratives. We are here to lay claim to the larger Pauline tradition and the company of saints who not only affirmed it but willingly laid down their lives on its behalf, believing that death was to be embraced as a way of life, a calling to follow Christ all the way to the cross. We are here to honor one who taught us how to live, both by emptying herself in life as well as in choosing to embrace the cross of Jesus as she approached death itself.

Arlene Greer Stephens’ journey began first in Garfield County, Oklahoma, migrating at an early age from tiny Garber to the more-populous town of Enid. And it ended some 77 years later in Greenville, Illinois. The distance between these two places is roughly 565 miles. One can even drive it in a single day, if one is so disposed. I know most of the route quite well because except for the last few hours of the journey, it was the way I drove home when I first matriculated as a student here at Greenville College. You begin by heading west to St. Louis and continue on what is now Interstate 44 across the rolling hills of the central part of the state and down into the cattle country of southwest Missouri. You forge your way southwest along the Will Rogers Turnpike through the green spaces of northeastern Oklahoma until the soil begins to change from brown to red. (Now, for those of you who haven’t had the pleasure of visiting the Sooner state, you’re just going to have to take my word for it—the soil really is red, not brown, not black.) When you get to Tulsa, you hook a hard right and go due west along the Cimarron Turnpike which terminates at Interstate 35 where it heads north to Wichita. And

finally, you drive the last 31 miles along old Highway 64, until you reach the last really-civilized part of the state, known as Enid. Now Enid is not at the end of the world, but as some are prone to say, you can most certainly see the end of the world from there.

When Arlene was born in May of 1931, the nation was firmly locked in the grip of the Great Depression. Life in northwest Oklahoma during the 1930's was anything but pleasant. Whole herds of cattle sat emaciated in the dust and died trying to find enough to eat, while the oilmen struggled to sink wells when the winds blew across the northern plains bringing with them the topsoil of the Dakotas, Nebraska, and Kansas. Wives tried covering their windows with bed sheets and mothers sent their children to school with homemade face-masks. In his book, *The Worst Hard Time*, author Timothy Egan tells the story of the tenacity of those who stuck it out and stayed, oftentimes literally smiling with grit between their teeth. Of such stock were Bob and Opal Greer and the children whom they would bear.

Those of us fortunate enough to know Mr. Greer, learned what a large shadow he cast across the landscape. A businessman's businessman, Bob's determination to succeed, no matter how tough the times, rubbed off on his daughter. Before ever Arlene was Rich Stephens' wife, she was her daddy's girl. In fact, when I phoned home about a year ago to relay the message of Arlene's approaching battle with cancer, I told my dad to simply tell the old-timers to pray for "Bob Greer's daughter." No matter that she had been married to Rich for well over a half-century—as far as they were concerned, she was still her father's daughter.

In the midst of all of the gloom and darkness of those times, you would have thought that Arlene's earliest memories might have been similarly shrouded. But when I asked her a few weeks ago about childhood remembrances, she instead recounted for me the story of life at the Enid Free Methodist Church where she grew up. In those days when the world seemed to be falling apart, folk learned to find joy in the simple things that bound families and communities together—and that most often meant the church. It was there in that little prairie church one Sunday where the preacher offered, as was his wont, an altar call and no one stirred in their pew—not even after singing all the verses, perhaps even twice through. But there sat little red-headed Arlene and she took pity on the poor preacher and thought she would go forward so that he wouldn't be disappointed. She told me how at conference time shortly thereafter his name was read off for another circuit and she cried and cried back in her room—something many of us who were preacher's kids did quite often after the reading of the appointments.

Arlene's journey to Greenville, though, was not travelled in a day and it was anything but a straight shot. In those days if you were Free Methodist and you lived in Oklahoma, you knew that if you were lucky enough to get to go on for further schooling you went first to Central College—do not pass go, do not collect \$200—go directly to McPherson, Kansas. There her dad served on the college board and any man who wanted that fun-loving Okie would have to go through Bob Greer. Enter the occasionally lackadaisical, sometimes-less-than-stellar student, somewhat full-of-himself athlete from the metropolis of Ashburn, Missouri—W. Richard "Rich" Stephens. It would take all of the self confidence young Rich could muster to win over the attractive Arlene with her critical eye and, more importantly, her businessman father. Word has it that Mr. Greer made certain discrete inquiries about the scholastic acumen of young Mr. Stephens. But Rich never backed down, even managing to hike his way to her home in Enid to prove his love, and winning over her father with down-home country-boy stories about his

ingenuity on the farm—something that would later serve him in good stead when he would need to win over prospective donors. From that point on, they were to be a team—Rich and Arlene together, “till death do them part.”

They got married during their time at Greenville and immediately they hit the road—Rich for the army and Arlene for the schoolhouse. They learned to live simply and to enjoy carving out a life together, coming back to teach at Greenville before Rich continued on to Indiana State and Indiana University, until 1971 when they returned to make Greenville their permanent home. By this time, they had acquired three rambunctious children—Rick, Kendall, and Kelli—into each of whom Arlene attempted to instill a bit of her characteristic sense of humor, not to mention her absolute rejection of anything verging on pretentiousness. While raising her children and perfecting the art of being the Dean’s wife, Mrs. Stephens loved getting people together for food, for fun, and for fellowship. Whether it was the Shakespeare Club, the Greenville Women’s Club, her own concoction called the Gourmet Club, or the college’s Orange Beret Corps, Arlene was the driving force behind much of what brought people together.

It was this whirling dervish that I first remember meeting when I was dropped off rather ignominiously in front of Joy Hall in the fall of 1975. Though I had three great-aunts in town to keep an eye on me, my own similarly strong-willed red-headed mother was safely ensconced back in Oklahoma. So it was that, probably like other college strays, Arlene decided to take an interest in me. It worked out rather well since I was almost equidistant in age between her two sons, Rick and Kendall. When Kendall joined a band I was in during his freshman year, I was somehow made to understand from Arlene’s queries that my job was to make sure her middle child stayed out of trouble. (Sorry, Arlene. Kendall, I’ll never tell, if you never tell.)

Through a whole series of unlikely events including Dr. Herron’s departure and my own participation in student government, I wound up serving on the Presidential Search Committee in 1977, which later nominated W. Richard Stephens as Greenville College’s eighth president. And when it came time to make the announcement to the GC community, Rich and Arlene asked me to introduce them in chapel. From that point on, it sometimes felt like I was something of an adopted son to the first family—something I later learned extended to quite a few young men and women who found themselves in my situation over the years.

From 1977 until 1993, Arlene not only served as the college’s “First Lady,” she organized everyone and everything in sight. From her perch in the sanctuary choir, Mrs. Stephens had a bird’s eye view of the entire congregation over which she presided as Chair of the Love Care Committee. If you were new to the community, she spied you out, had you over to dinner or matched you up with others of her acquaintance. Even after Rich’s retirement, she traveled with him to meet with the spouses of new Christian college Presidents to school them in the art of playing second fiddle to the campus CEO. And anyone who knew Arlene knows that her advice had little to do with tea and crumpets, but much more about how to handle the “slings and arrows of misfortune.”

The real joy of retirement, though, came with the opportunity to see and spend time with the emerging brood of grandchildren. As Ashlee, Billy, Garrett, Tanner, Austin, Michelle, Judson, Sarah, and Nathan know all too well, their “nanna” not only loved them, she doted on them. She learned the personality of each one, discovering which most needed a hug and which occasionally needed a kick in the seat of the pants. As she had poured out her life first

into her kid brother, Dick, and then her husband, Rich, she went on to do the same for her children, her grandchildren, and the thousands of GC students and community folk with whom she came in contact. Life was good for Rich and Arlene as they traveled the country and had time to spend with old friends and family, operating as ambassadors for the college and the church.

And then it happened. Just over a year ago the devastating news came that what her husband, Rich, has dubbed the “scourge of cancer” had invaded her lungs. Those of you who have been around this community over the last few years know that we at the college were still fresh from the loss of one first lady to cancer and we were none too anxious to see another of our beloved ones have to undergo the same uncertain journey. But, just as she had done so often before when hard times had come, this stubborn red-head plucked from the swirling dust of the Oklahoma Dustbowl refused to give in. She willingly chose to give herself over to the greatest challenge of her life. After all, anyone who had managed to emerge from her father’s shadow and keep W. Richard Stephens and Greenville College in shape wasn’t about to sit down when it came to the challenge of the “C-word.”

Arlene received the very best of care, both here in Greenville and at Barnes Hospital in St. Louis. Different treatments were used, some with more success than others. But, over time, she began to weaken and even to gasp for breath. Prayers went up for her across the country and cards poured in from family, friends, trustees, alumni, and admirers. The web of relationships forged over decades was large and provided a support network for the Stephens’ family. But, in the end, it was really Arlene and Rich who, together, had to do the work in the trenches. This couple who, in their early twenties, had stood in front of a congregation and said, “for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health; till death do us part,” had to learn anew what it meant to live into those vows in a way they could never have imagined on that hot summer’s day so long ago in 1952.

So Rich became the caregiver, and Arlene determined to give it her all. When visitors would come to the house and, later to the hospital, her classic smile would usually make a reappearance and the twinkle in her eyes would warm your heart. She loved especially the young men who would come around, whether her grandsons or the quartet with the ring of a legal firm (of Reinhard, Beans, Disch, and Beans) come to sing for her. Old friends like Jim and Wilma or Tom and Betty would provide her with the will to face the next uncertain treatment and when members of the Greer or Stephens’ clan were there, you were sure to hear peals of laughter coming down the hall.

But at the end, she grew weak and knew that her time was short. So it was that about a fortnight ago we sat in her hospital room on a wintry day and discussed this very service. On her final night, Dr. John called me and we gathered at her bedside—Kelli stroking her mother’s hand, while Rich pulled back her wisps of hair and breathed into her ear how much he loved her. Garrett and Tanner came to say good-bye and the Wilson’s stood just outside in the corridor with the freshly-arrived Carol in tow. My friends, I have sat at the death bed of scores of folk in my life. I can’t say that it is ever a pleasant experience. But it is a sacred and holy calling. And in those moments, Rich confessed the very heart of the Christian gospel, the crux of the passion of Jesus, when he said simply to his beloved, with all of us overhearing, “God is here.”

We live in confused and confusing times. There are a whole host of competing ideologies that seem to inform popular American Evangelicalism. Some believe that God is primarily to be found in the supernatural, or in some kind of self-proclaimed miracle. Some think that God is to be discovered wherever there are outward signs of worldly success—where the churches are big, the band is smooth, the technology “cool,” and the pastor is handsome. Some insist that God’s presence is to be associated with some kind of observable phenomena that forms the basis for one’s faith—a divinely-dictated text or speaking in some other-worldly tongue.

But Arlene and Rich came to discover the greatest wonder of all—that God is to be found in the very midst of pain, suffering, and even death. God is to be found not primarily in the spectacular, but in the everyday and in the ordinary. God is to be found in places we would never expect to find Him, like a manger in Bethlehem or a cross outside of Jerusalem. God is to be found in an ordinary couple who take seriously their wedding vows and who, despite all of the lures of this world, choose to do the right and noble thing. And, in such ordinary and out-of-the-way places and through such feeble and ordinary creatures as we, Christ becomes sacramentally present through the power of the Holy Spirit at work in the church and in the world.

And so, this morning, I stand before you as a witness—because there on a cold, dark December night at our own little Greenville Municipal Hospital, I saw God. I saw God in a woman who loved her Lord and Savior and witnessed the same before her family to the very end—despite the most difficult circumstances that life can throw at us. I saw God in a husband who loved his wife so much he was willing to let her go, despite the pain that he knew must certainly follow. I saw God in the love and undying loyalty of a daughter who held the hand of her mother knowing that she would soon be left motherless. I saw God in the care of a loving physician who had done all that he could do to save a patient, but insisted on doing still more by the simple act of refusing to abandon her bedside as she faced the most difficult journey of her life. And I saw God in members of this church and this community who prayed, who loved, and who stood beside this couple and this family over the travails of the last year or so. I can only stand in awe of such love made incarnate.

And this, my friends, is nothing less than the Church with a capital “C”, and Jesus has said that the very gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And, today, the parameters of that church extend into time and into space to embrace the *communio sanctorum*—the “communion of saints,” to whom we bear witness in the Creed. And among that communion is now included our wife, our daughter, our sister, our mother, our grandmother, our friend—that little girl from Enid, Oklahoma, who grew up to become the first lady of Greenville College and of all of our hearts: Arlene Stephens.

And someday, each of us will make the same journey as did she and we will be faced with whether we will embrace our true calling and our vocation, hidden in the cross of Jesus Christ. And when we do, let us remember the words of the apostle to which our sister, Arlene, laid claim: “I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing,” (2 Timothy 4:7-8).

