

WITH GRATITUDE

You didn't know this guy.
His name was Pete.
And he became a member of our church
 in the early years –
 in the late 70's.

He was always here.
Always smiling.
Always encouraging Dr. Robb and me.
Always jumping in wherever he was needed.
Never served on
 the Administrative board or
 the trustees or
 the finance committee.
More of a behind the scenes guy –
 more like a utility player.

Pete had a tough go of it.
As a matter of fact,
 Stew Grant and I referred to him as Job.

Lost his wife unexpectedly when she was middle-aged.
His daughter had struggled a lot growing up and as a young adult.
She died when her children were teenagers.
 So Pete stepped in and raised them.
One of them,
 his granddaughter died in a fire that destroyed the home
 where she was staying.
And somewhere in the process he was diagnosed with a brain tumor
 that slowed him down a lot.
But it didn't stop him.

He was always here,
 always smiling,
 always encouraging,
 always helping,
 always sharing his faith.

I've always loved the story of how Pete joined our church.
Like I said this was in the early years
 before we had a building.

The church was meeting at the Woodlands Athletic Center.
Every week,
 the altar and the pulpit had to be set up,
 chairs had to be put in place and taken down,
 the refreshment station had to be manned.

I've always loved the story of how Pete joined the church.
His wife wasn't feeling well so he came for the first time
 by himself.

He sat through the service and thought it was ok.
Sermon was good and the music was, too.

As he was leaving, another man in our church approached him
 and didn't know it was Pete's first time.

So, instead of saying,
 Hi, my name is Fred, we're glad you're here.
 Or, thanks so much for coming,
 we hope you'll come again.

Fred looks at Pete and says,
 Hey, buddy, you wanna help us put these chairs back where they belong?

Wow, first time at a church,
 checking things out,
 wondering if this might be the place for you and your family,
you start to leave and a guy comes up and doesn't say,
 "We're so glad you came this morning.
 We hope you'll come back."

Instead, he says, "Hey, brother,
 these chairs aren't going to move themselves. Let's go. Chop, chop."

Pete went home and Louise said,
So, what was it like.
Pete responded,
I think I found our church.

Oh, yeah, Louise said, why?
Pete's answer?
Because they need us.

We're not a young church anymore.
I'm doing funerals for people who helped us get started in the
late 70's and the early 80's.
People who moved chairs and
who taught children's Sunday school classes and
who took our youth on UM Army trips
where they learned that Christians love and serve the poor.
People who hosted small groups in their homes and
who picked up senior citizens so they could come to church and
mowed the church grounds before we could afford
to pay a service to do it.

And at their funerals,
I tell their loved ones:
We remember.
Dr. Robb and I remember
they way your loved one served
and gave his or her life for this church
and believed in us and
in what God was doing
when there really wasn't much here.

People who said,
I'm going to help because they need me.

I think that's always been the story of how the Gospel has spread.
For two thousand years.
There are the big names –
Peter and Paul and James and John.
Martin Luther and John Calvin and John Wesley.
Charles Finney, Dwight Moody, and Billy Graham.

But for every one of those,
there are thousands of people you'll never know
doing God's work in smaller ways
that make Christ real in the lives of people.

At the end of Romans 16,
Paul sends his greetings to some people
like the ones I've just been describing.
People that we are referring to in this series as
Almost Famous.

Let me read part of that for you.

Romans 16: I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church. She has been the benefactor of many people, including me. Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you. Greet Ampliatus, my dear friend in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our co-worker in Christ, and my dear friend Stachys. Greet Apelles, whose fidelity to Christ has stood the test. Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord. Greet my dear friend Persis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord. Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too.

Most of these names you never come across again in the Bible.
They didn't get fifteen minutes of fame.
They got a single shout out.
Not famous but faithful.
Like my friend Pete and others in our church,
never a big name,
but people who made a difference in Paul's life a
and in the lives of others.

We cannot determine if we are given opportunities to do great things
for the Kingdom of God.
Things that are seen and celebrated.
Things that are public and praised.

We cannot determine what opportunities we are given,
but we can decide to be a Pete.

We can decide to be a man who will be faithful
to serve our Savior and love others.

We can choose to work hard in the Lord
for the spreading of the Gospel
and the growth of God's Kingdom.

St. Augustine: What is a little thing is a little thing. But to be faithful in a
little thing is a huge thing.

Whatever opportunities we are given,
being faithful is a huge thing.
And it's how the Gospel has gone forth for the past two millennia.

This evening/morning.
I'm going to tell you about some people,
not famous,
but people who made a difference in my life.
Each one in their own way did the work of God
and taught me a very important lesson.
All three of them come from my time in the little town of Atlanta
in deep East Texas near Texarkana.

1. I AM GRATEFUL FOR A. L. POINT.

Here's a wild number.
581
That's how many weddings I've done.
581

And it doesn't matter if the couple is young
or if they're old.
There's always a moment that's really great.

It's when the groom is standing at the altar,
the groomsmen beside him.
The bridesmaids walk in and take their places and
the doors to the sanctuary close.
And then the bridal march begins,
the ushers open the doors
and stand aside.

And the bride steps into the sanctuary –
and she's always looking down the aisle at the very same place.
The face of the man she loves –
who is always looking directly at her.
And they both smile
and they remember how much they love each other
and for a minute the whole world goes away.

Every time I see it,
I think this is a perfect moment.

Two people in love,
surrounded by people who care for them,
committing their lives to each other.

It's perfect right?
How could anything be any better?

Right after I got to Atlanta, TX,
a man named A. L. Point wanted me to come to his home and
and meet his wife.

Here were his exact words: I want you to meet "my Mary."

Mary was homebound.
She had Alzheimer's.
I didn't know how severe her case was,
whether she had been diagnosed recently or many years before.

Mr. Point was up in his 80's as was Mary.
And he wanted me to meet her.

So, I gladly went to their home to do that.
Atlanta is a small town,
 roughly 6000 people.

The Points lived on Green Acres street.
One of the older sections of the town.
Their home was small and humble.

Mr. Point met me at the door.
He was a little man,
 bald,
 bent over a bit,
 with a warm smile.

He was one of those old men – you 've seen them.
They have their pants pulled way up high
 and they shuffle around when they walk.

I stepped inside
 and well, there's not a house like it in The Woodlands.

There were signs of love and care that had made it comfortable –
 that had made it a home.
But it was obvious that the Points had never had much money.

Their furniture – I'm not sure how to put it
 without sounding different than I mean to.
Let me just say,
 they were modest people
 who lived in a modest home
 and who obviously had never had much to spare.

Mr. Point took me into the den.
He brought me a cup of coffee.
And he began to tell me about his life
 and about Mary.
How much he loved her.

He spoke of her in the most wondrous terms.
He talked about how bright she was
 and how caring she had always been.
And how she had been the best wife any man could ever have.
And pretty, too.

He said that he never left the house,
 never left Mary's side,
 except when a neighbor came by once a week so he could buy groceries.
Other than that, he told me, you can always find me here.

And then he clapped his hands
 and stood slowly,
 and said, "Let's go meet Mary."

We walk down the hall to the bedroom.
He opened the door and said, "Mary, I want you to meet Brother Rob."

Then as if he was ushering me into the presence of royalty he says,
 "And Rob, this is Mary."
He was beaming with love and pride.

I looked in and here's this woman in a hospital bed
 and her limbs were so thin.
She was skin and bones.
Her legs thrashed about,
 first in one direction and then the other.
Her face was gaunt,
 her cheeks were hollow,
 her hair was gray and thin.
Her mouth was always open
 and her head flopped back and forth.

We stepped to the bed.
I greeted her and said a few words.
As far as I could tell she didn't understand a single syllable I spoke to her.
I certainly didn't understand anything she might have been trying to say to
 me.

I stood there for a few minutes.
awkwardly stroked her arm,
and said a prayer for her.

Eventually we began to leave.
Mr. Point stopped as I stepped out of the room
and went back
and kissed Mary on the forehead
and said, "Sweetheart, I'll be right back."

After we shut the door he said to me.
Brother Rob, I just have one prayer that I ever pray.
I just pray that Mary will die before I do.

I could understand it.
How many years had he been in this house?
Unable to leave.
No life.
No time to himself.
How many years had he been changing diapers
day after day?
How long has this been his world?

I just pray Mary dies before I do, he said.
Because I know that
no one will ever take care of her the way I do.
No one will ever love her like I do.

Perfect?
Not by a long shot.
Nothing about that was perfect.

They weren't young,
they weren't beautiful,
they weren't surrounded by friends and family.
No music was playing them down a church aisle.

All they had was each other.
And a vow they had taken on a day that had been perfect.

There are men the world admires.
Men the world envies.
Men the world celebrates.

And I've known some of them.
But I've never known one greater
than a little man living in a little house in a small east Texas town.

I've seen greatness.
I know what it looks like.
It looks like caring more about someone else
than you care about yourself.
It looks like serving –
and loving the fact that you get to serve.
It looks like being faithful when
no one is watching
and no one will ever know.

Philippians 2.3-10: Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature^[a] God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature^[b] of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross! Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name.

I've seen greatness.
It looks like a little man in a little house doing small things for a woman
he loved more than himself.
It looks like Jesus
and it looks like who I want to be.

2. I AM GRATEFUL FOR HELEN ALEXANDER.

Philippians 4.4-5: Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.

I am grateful for the lesson that it's not what happens to me that makes the difference – it's what happens in me.

My circumstances do not determine my life – my decisions do.

We can choose to rejoice.

We can choose to live by faith.

We can choose to rise above our circumstances
and love God and serve others no matter
what has happened to us.

In Christ we have all we need.

All we need to be happy

all we need for a life that is full

all we need to decide

nothing will steal the joy that is mine in Jesus Christ.

3. I AM GRATEFUL FOR O.K. ADCOCK

O.K Adcock was raised in little rural community in Louisiana,
but O. K. had big dreams.

He planned to be the first one in his family to go to college
and make something of himself.

In fact, he hoped to go into the ministry.

To pursue that goal

he entered Centenary College in Shreveport.

But after a year,

it was the time of the depression,

his family fell on hard times,

and he left school to go back home

and help make ends meet.

Deep down, he knew he'd never go back.

As a young man he went into insurance.

His business in Vivian thrived.

He was a respected leader in that little town

and become president of the Chamber of Commerce.

Then he was diagnosed with a severe case of epilepsy
that required heavy medication.

Mental blackouts followed.

At first he acted as if he could just will them away.

Keep working,
try harder,
don't give up.

In those days insurance business
didn't take place on the internet or over the phone,
not even in an agent's office.

It was done in a family's kitchen
or around the dining room table.

While driving to an appointment,
Mr. Adcock woke up from a blackout,
his car wrapped around a telephone pole.
He realized for the safety of others and for his own,
he could never drive again.
And he would have to give up his business.

Imagine yourself.
Thirty-six years old.
Four children and a wife depending on you.

You've already given up one dream.
But you've worked hard,
and you're making a go of it.
And now that's taken from you.

O. K. became a pipe fitter in the oil fields of Louisiana.
It was there that one day a strap broke,
and some piped rolled off a truck
and over his legs.
That's why his legs were twisted and gnarled when I knew him.

Shortly after that O. K. and his wife Ouida
moved to Atlanta to care for her elderly father.
And that's when O. K. Adcock the little boy with the big dreams,
became the janitor at the Methodist Church.
And he cleaned toilets for men who would have looked up to him as a leader
who might have even called him pastor
if life had been different.

Life has a way, doesn't it?
Of trying to overcome us.

Maybe your challenges have been like mine.
You have big dreams
 and often you feel unprepared and inadequate.
But you head out each day
 to learn something new,
 try something hard,
 grow enough until your skills are big enough to make your dreams come
 true.

But there is a more difficult battle.
It's the one I saw Mr. Adcock fight.
It's the battle you fight when your hopes are gone.
When your dreams are taken from you,
 and it looks like and it feels like the world has overcome you.

It's the battle to bring dignity to all you do,
 to keep offering your best,
 to turn your back on bitterness,
 and be happy for others and their successes.

When Mr. Adcock died I met with his children
 and I asked them what they remembered most about their dad growing up.
Together they said: It was his singing.
All the time,
 but especially on Sunday mornings.
Once so loud that a neighbor came over and said,
 "O. K. we're trying to sleep in this morning – could you hold it down."

That's when life was good.
What about later.
When everything had been taken from him.

Preparing for the funeral, I asked one of the old timers there in Atlanta
 about O K, what was he like.
Well, he told me, he was the custodian at the church.
 Best one we ever had.
And of course, there was the singing.

You'd hear him up on the second floor,
or you'd see him at the end of the hall with his back to you,
cane in one hand,
pushing the mop bucket with the other,
and you could hear him:

There's within my heart a melody,
Jesus whispers sweet and lo,
Fear not, I am with thee, peace be still,
In all of life's ebb and flow.

Jesus, Jesus, Jesus,
sweetest name I know,
fills my every longing,
keeps me singing as I go.

I don't know the troubles you face.
But I know you have them.

Jesus told us we would.
But he also told us we could overcome.

John 16.33: In this world you will have trouble. But take heart for I have overcome the world.

O. K. had trouble in his life,
that's for sure.
But just as sure,
Mr. Adcock overcame the world and its troubles.
And he did so because Jesus was with him.

I learned a lesson from OK
and many people did.
I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.
I can bring kindness and dignity and faith to all I do
and I can be a blessing to others
if I remain connected to Jesus.
And that means I can overcome.
And so can you.
And you can overcome the world.

4. I AM GRATEFUL FOR YOU.

KITCHEN CREW

TOM KIRKENDALL

ORINGINAL CREW

JOHN HULL

100 MEN TO JUAREZ

HONDURAS – HOUSE

GEORGE LINDAHL

TERRY LOUGHRIDGE

OTHERS