

What I Learned on Wednesdays

(In memory of Rev. Dr. Theodore H. Mueller, b. 1924, d. 2012)

For the last three years, I have spent my Wednesday afternoons with a retired pastor who moved to the area near my church. He was not a shut-in, merely someone I visited who really enjoyed having lively conversations with me. He was a man small of stature, but a man with a firm handshake. He had a crooked walk from the brace that he wore after nearly dying from Polio as a child. He was a tiny man, really, but will always seem like a giant to me. He was a man of great intelligence, a theologian of theologians, some of his work carried across the world to foreign missionaries. He was cousin to the famous Chryst family, renowned in France for their missionary zeal. It was no surprise to me that he started his ministry post-seminary as an educator; I am sure being in the classroom fit him like a glove. Make no mistake, though; he was a pastor (more on that below).

He had a colorful life story. He grew up in a war-torn part of Europe which shifted between being part of either France or Germany. He was quite cultured and sophisticated, a man after my own heart, and was very "old school." He thought Beethoven was much too contemporary, that good music ended with Bach, and that the Apple Ipad was part tool and part demon. He had very high standards for preaching and teaching and was very complimentary towards me. He appreciated how I engaged people in the biblical text, yet also preached repentance and forgiveness, the gospel rather than life principles. I didn't get the sense that he was trying to teach me or that he viewed me as a pupil. The funny thing about a good teacher and mentor is that his students don't always realize that they're actually being taught.

Theologically, he taught me the importance of words; he would unpack a word like grace or righteousness with meticulous care. With him, this was more than just an intellectual endeavor. He always had a sense of urgency to this because he had family members in mind. He was intent to unpack and understand eternal words that are filled with life and salvation, for left hidden in unbelief or lost in doctrinal translation, they remain empty and dark apart from faith. Beyond the theological, I learned about the beauty of the landscape in France and Germany, the treasure of good bread and fine wine, the barbarianism of Americans for peeling their potatoes, and the utter depravity of humanity in times of war, which pit villager against villager. I learned what it was like to be an immigrant and to raise a multi-cultural family. I often found myself going back and forth with him on politics and religion, as well.

In all of our conversations, I never leaned on him as a father confessor. I was there to provide spiritual care for him, which sometimes involved just sitting at the feet of one who loved to teach. I didn't lay my burdens on him because I was there to let him grieve the things he had lost, to sort out his frustrations on aging, and to deal with his anger over not doing what he loved to do. I saw tearful emotions in this stout little man on a good number of afternoons, and in response, I tried to help him see past his current sufferings in light of the joys that lie ahead. Even during these moments, however, he was teaching.

His eyes would light up when he would speak of his years serving in the ministry. He wanted to tell me of every detail, from each piece of the new stained glass window to every rank of the pipe organ that he and the local priest had installed. He told me about his flock like they were a part of his extended family. Little did I know that class was in session. Every time I would experience a bad week (feeling unappreciated or experiencing discouragement because someone was just not grasping my teachings, etc.)--those moments when I had heard the last criticism I wanted to hear and was ready to call it a day--he would smack me right between the eyes with two stone tablets. All he would have to do is speak so fondly of the church where he served and his love for his people. He missed serving in the office of the public ministry so much that it felt as if something had been amputated. At these low moments of mine, this little man would symbolically pick me up and shake me as if I was a rag doll. It was as if he was saying, "You fool, do you not know the privilege that you have been given to serve Christ, to be sheepdog to the Great Shepherd who laid down His life for His sheep."

In response, I would find myself thinking: "Yes, pastor, for all of the fantastic things that I have been able to be a part of in my short ministry, you have taught me that which is most honorable and good."

With little warning, this teacher departed this world. Just this week I was able to proclaim the final benediction to one who for many years had blessed others. I had the honor of giving him the commendation of the dying, to tell him "well done good and faithful servant", and to lay to rest a soldier of the cross who has now been crowned with eternal life. He may have been short in stature and unrenowned to the world, but he was a giant to me. I pray that the day will come for me, too, that, though my name will go down in obscurity, all of the places where I brought Christ will continue to be blessed by Him, and that I, too, will rest from labors that were not in vain.

I recall the many times the good Reverend Doctor told me to never get old, and I would respond that I only know of one alternative. Truly he now knows the fullness of the glory of that alternative. Many a time he said he wished he had died in the pulpit, but I would always tell him I was glad he was still here, meeting with me. I am glad he was here to teach me about theology, love, life and death . . . and without even trying, he taught me that to live the life of a pastor is to live a life that is a high Doxology. Rest in Peace, Rev. Dr. Theodore Henry Frederick Mueller.

Pastor Steve Schave

St Paul Lutheran Church, Cincinnati, OH

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