

## **In Thanksgiving for the life of Edyth McKitrick**

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Martha and I have been singularly blessed by the long friendship with Edyth. I often heard people say that she was a sweet “lady.” On the contrary, I found her not so much sweet as formidable. Her quietness and kindness came from something deeper than sweet. Her long marriage to an impressive and distinguished husband, as Eric was, might have led a superficial observer to overlook, at first, this self-effacing and selfless spouse.

I once mentioned how much I envied Eric’s love of writing as I found writing a painful and too easily postponed burden. Her reply was, “Yes, Eric loves to write. He’s been writing the same book for 27 years!” She was also a gifted editor. Edyth’s editing was not only acute but often humorous. Stanley Elkins and Eric had described Thomas Paine’s father as “a mild and rather ineffective corset maker.” She noted in the margin, “Do you mean that his corsets fell down?”

Although quiet and rarely assertive, when she did speak she carried remarkable authority. When we were looking for a new headmaster for Grace Church School we were fortunate to interview Kingsley Ervin, who had international and masterful experience in prep schools. However, much to our disappointment he turned us down. I called Eric to share my disappointment. “Oh,” he said, “he’s changed his mind.” “How so?” I asked. “Oh, Edyth just said to him, “Kingsley, you do not have the moral option to turn this down.” and that changed his mind.”

But there seemed to be few outlets for her many abilities. During our times at Grace Church, the Cedar Tavern, the Adirondacks, Michigan, Washington, D. C. and South Carolina, Martha and I could see a deep love and knowledge of English Literature in which she had a masters degree and some lingering hopes of going on to a Ph.D. She pointed out to me the wonderful poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, “Blind Bartimaeus” in which each stanza is completed with the great Reformation text; “Thy faith hath made thee whole.” But Longfellow gave instead of English the beautiful Greek alliteration;  
Hey pistis sou sesoken sey.

One cannot but regret that such interest and ability did not culminate in the kind of scholarship of which she was capable. But is this not everyone’s story that life does not allow for all options? And suppose she had left all and followed a calling to literary endeavors of which she was so eminently capable? Eric’s achievements would have been seriously curtailed; Grace Church would not have that enduring monument, the excellent archives. And even more important we may not have had Fred, Charlie, Mary and Enid.

An inscription in St. Paul’s Cathedral, London, by Christopher Wren’s son reads: “If you would see the man’s monument look around.” If you would see Edyth’s monument look at the archives of Grace Church, look between the lines of Eric’s books, and look at the letters she wrote to her children. And look at her children.

The many years of diligent work on the history of Grace Church left her with the conviction that Henry Potter, later bishop of New York, was perhaps the outstanding rector of this church, a conviction worth sharing. Potter had this to say about our faith, “Did He – this

Christ who had not to lay His head and whose feet and hands ever nailed for our salvation to that accursed tree – did He, think you, die on a cross and die as a felon that you and I should be ignorant of His promises to us?”

One of those promises is recorded in Matt: 22: 29 – To the Sadducees who denied the resurrection of the dead he made this promise quite emphatically, “And as for the resurrection of the dead: You are wrong. You know neither the scriptures nor the power of God . . . And as for the resurrection of the dead have you not read what was said to you by God. ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’” He is not God of the dead but of the living.”

This promise is a strange promise to modern ears.

Much more congenial to modern ears is the hope expressed in the play JB by Archibald MacLeish- a contemporary version of the classical story of Job. J.B’s oldest son is killed in training through the stupidity of an officer. His next two children are mashed on concrete pavement by a drunk driver, his last child is raped and killed by the village idiot.

He chokes out in heart broken anguish the biblical affirmation: “The Lord gave. The Lord has taken away. Blessed be the Lord!” But his wife Sarah will have none of it. “I will not let you offer our innocent children on the altar of your God! God is good and he is not God, or God is God and he is not good. Curse God and die” and she left him.

At the end of the play Sarah comes back to JB. You said, “Curse God and die and you left me.” “Yes,” she says, “I loved you. I couldn’t help you any more. You wanted justice and there isn’t any. You cry for justice and the stars will shine ‘til your eyes sting. There is no justice. There is only love. Blow on the coal of the heart.” And here the play ends.

Here is the Sadducee hope: there is no resurrection. There is no final justice. There is only love. What kind of love is it when there is no justice when nothing will ever finally be set right?

That kind of love without justice is characterized by a self-centeredness that twists and betrays all loves. We are surrounded by loves that are bereft of justice, predatory loves, loves that are not fair, loves that seek to control, to coerce, and seek to kill, and do kill. Who would choose to reduce one’s hope to such loves. Who would choose to hope that there will never be any justice? Nothing will ever be fair, be put right? I think there are some reasons.

Most of us do hope for justice. Yes I want the person who assaulted my son-in-law punished, if not in this world, in the next. I want Hitler’s responsibility for 20 million deaths to be avenged. Stalin, with his even greater evil must be held accountable. Should all of those wicked people in history that have been allowed to die peacefully in bed be forever free from responsibility?

But this means what’s sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. Jesus’ promise of resurrection is a promise of judgment not just for Bin Laden but for me, too. I am not sure I want to sign on for that hope of justice. St. Paul teaches us that we all must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil according to what he has done in the body. (II Cor. 5:10). I don’t know about you but I do not like tests. I recall being examined after years of study at Oxford. The trouble was that the more I knew the more I knew what I did not yet know. It was as W. H. Auden puts it, “. . . like climbing a glassy mountain

with no footholds for logic, where knowledge merely increases vertigo.” The more one knows the dizzier it gets. The more one knows the more he is aware of what he doesn’t know. My only hope to pass was that my examiners would not know how much I did not know.

I had the advantage in Oxford that my examiners were not God. But here is God “unto whom all hearts are open all desires known and from whom no secrets are hid.” There is no way I can pass that exam. The only apparent hope the world has is that, if there is a God, he will grade on the curve. We know we are not perfect but we think we are much better than a lot of people. To feed this false hope we need to know how bad others are. We gossip and are delighted to learn terrible things others have done. Others are worse than I am, maybe I’ll get a pass. Sorry, that will not do. God does not grade on a curve. Then for what do we hope?

What gives Christians hope is the operative phrase in II Cor. 5:10, the passage concerning our final judgment, our last test: “we must appear before the judgment seat of Christ,” the judgment seat of Christ. There at that judgment seat we know our only hope is mercy and that mercy is the promise Henry Codman Potter claimed was sealed in blood, a promise for sinners like me . . . and you. Then we know the only dignity we have before God is his mercy in Jesus Christ.

McLeish speaks for the culture we breathe: There is no final justice, ultimately nothing is fair, the goodness to which our aims strive is never to be reached, sin, selfishness, tears, loneliness, cruelty, and death are, at last, unresolved, unhealed, unredeemed. The last words are inadequate and unloving realities. That is the choice of the Sadducees and the culture we breathe.

Another is the choice of hope for justice and even in defeats and tragedy and disappointment, wars and death there is meaning. The things and events of this world are not the Last Word. This is the promise of Edyth’s favorite Henry C. Potter, and his promise is the

promise of Jesus Christ. This promise is the choice we are enabled to make,. The only way we are able to choose this promise is to know that the judgment seat is Jesus Christ and his mercy. Not with McLeish’s JB but with God’s Job we can then say:

“I know that my Redeemer liveth and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: and though this body be destroyed, yet shall I see God whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold and not as a stranger.”