

"VALDOSTA"
MARK 1: 29-39

February 8, 2009
University Church of Chicago
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The house had once been elegant, a Victorian two-story with bay windows protruding at unexpected points overlaid with carved figures: flowers and griffins. Filigreed woodwork and leaded glass windows graced the stairwells and parlors. It had been the pride of Beverly Street at the turn of the twentieth century in the days when that neighborhood had been blessed with towering elm trees.

At about the time Dutch Elm Disease began to wipe out the trees, the old gentry moved away. The neighborhood reflected the pluralism of the city: one could hear languages like Portugese, Spanish, Tagalog, Hmong, Chinese and Korean spoken and the smells of curry, chiles, exotic fruits and peppers wafted from the new resaurants.

The house was not what it once had been. It had, in fact, grown quite shabby: paint peeled, windows were covered with plastic to block out the fierce winter winds and the once-grand parlors had been cut up into small apartments for students and newly-married couples who were living in intermediate circumstances until they could afford a new loft in Bucktown. The plastic was seldom entirely removed from the upstairs windows until one of the residents realized how stifling the summer heat had become.

Like the house, the old woman had grown a bit shabby. Once elegant, dignified, full of **elan vital** (a phrase her late husband used to describe her), the ravages of time, death and disease had bent her over, emotionally as well as physically. The strong, brave woman who had walked with purpose through Valdosta, Georgia now shuffled carefully down Beverly Street.

Spiritually, she was as strong as ever, and she was still nurtured by the memories of halcyon days in First Christian Church at the corner of Peachtree Street and First Avenue in Valdosta. She still clung to the old title of her longtime pastor, Dr. Thomas O. Prewitt, Pastor-in-Charge. Up here in the North she was more sustained by her private faith than by public expression of her beliefs. She spent long, patient hours reading the Upper Room and the King James Version of the Holy Bible. Her prayer list was more attenuated than in earlier days because many of the people whom she named before her God each day had passed on. Now she prayed with more intensity for her few living friends and each of her children and grandchildren. She went to University Church with her daughter on Sundays but she didn't get much from the sermons. The pastor seemed to be more in tune with Chicago politics than the Galilean ministry of Our Lord.

"Forced against my will" was the phrase she used to describe her emigration from Valdosta to Kenwood-Oakland. Contrary to her better judgment, she had acquiesced to the demands of her daughter and son-in-law and moved to this benighted northern city with its high-falutin' people who

never spoke to you on the street and ignored you in the supermarker, who forgot that they, too, had come from small towns and intimate little churches where everybody knew your business as well as your name. She heard them talking to each other about DVD's and CD's and I-Pods. She didn't understand a word of it. "Reminds me of the thirties when that infernal Roosevelt foisted all those acronyms off on us," she declared to her Democrat son-in-law. "WPA and TVA and the NRA. That man was a liar, that FDR, and he did terrible things to our country."

So, here she was living in an alien environment far from Georgia, far from the people she had known all her life, force out of her home on First Street and kitty-corner from the Methodist parsonage into a shabby old northern house with strange people. Why couldn't she live in her own place, in a town where everybody knew you and you could walk into Shackleford's Kroger store and Shakey would help you fill your shopping basket and even deliver when you were too sick to go to the square? Here. Here you had to walk to a huge, impersonal supermarket that was more interested in exotic things like the new barbecued fritos than Holsum bread and Velveeta cheese. "You're too old to drive, Mother," her daughter kept reminding her, "and your eyesight's not that good any more. If you don't want to walk, call me and I will take you to the store."

The old woman's only hope was her faith that God has a purpose for everything, that it's all part of a divine plan, that the hidden mysteries of the ages will ultimately be revealed. Even in this final chapter of humiliation and heartbreak and loneliness she held to the promise of the apostle that all things work together for good. That trust was the cornerstone of her life, of her faith. She didn't pretend to know what God was up to. God didn't seem to let her in on many of the divine secrets, "But you just have to put your trust that it's going to be right in the end," she would say. "I feel like Simon Peter's mother-in-law when Jesus came into her house. Except I don't think I can be healed. But I can get up and serve people. That's what I do best. I remember those wonderful potluck suppers at First Christian Church and all the food people brought. Everybody raced straight for my cherry pies."

So, she tried to love the strangers in her midst, she tried to adjust to the climate and the conditions. Still, the house troubled her. She wanted to know her anonymous neighbors, she wanted to help them, be friendly, let them know how much it mean to her to make real friends.

She had spent the first few months knocking on doors in the neighborhood, taking cakes and sweet potato pies and fresh biscuits with homemade blackberry jam--blackberries she had brought all the way from Georgia in Kroger sacks on the train. And giving away her most prized food, sweet Vidalia onions. But she noticed that most of her food gifts had ended up in the garbage cans in the alley. Strange people, she thought, that they looked so suspiciously at her when she knocked on their door and then they wouldn't even taste the food.

"Mother," Doris had admonished her, "people up here don't live like that. They don't appreciate your meddling in their lives, talking to their children, and trying to get them to eat your food. And you can't tell them how to rear their children."

"Rear? You mean raise, don't you, Doris? Rear is the way Yankees talk. We raise 'em up in the South."

"I don't care about the semantics, Mother. I'm telling you to stop bothering these people. Stop pestering them and trying to get them to like you. Most of them are from other cultures, other countries and they don't understand American food, especially Georgia cooking. Just keep to yourself. That's what people do in the city."

So, she stopped cooking for the neighbors, stopped speaking to strangers on the street. As she became more isolated, she noticed that her headaches increased in intensity. Her neck muscles were constantly tight, and the sounds of her neighbors' quarrels and lovemaking that permeated the thin walls disturbed her. The headaches drove her; she awakened almost every morning with a new pain--or was it a continuation of yesterday's? She didn't talk to Doris about them, and Ibuprofen, Aspirin, Tylenol--nothing seemed to alleviate the pain. You must stop worrying, Mrs. Grimsley, the doctor had said. Which for me is about as easy as flying to the moon, she thought as she left his office.

Late one night when she couldn't sleep and couldn't read she hand-printed tiny little labels and sewed them into every dress, every sweater and coat she owned. "If I am found dead, please ship my body immediately express collect to Dr. Thomas O. Prewitt, Valdosta, Georgia." There, she thought, at least Doris won't have to worry and my pastor will take care of me. Dr. Prewitt knows what I want done when I die. One less worry. A diminution of the headaches.

But the labels in her clothes seemed without her being aware of it to seal her off even more tightly from the neighbors. She became more satisfied in her isolation. Doris and the kids didn't stop by as often; they seemed to sense that they weren't needed and, besides, they were busy. They phoned most every day, but now Mrs. Grimsley knew that she could die and Dr. Prewitt would conduct the quiet graveside service in the presence of her few remaining contemporaries in Valdosta.

On the day after Christmas last year, Mrs. Grimsley climbed the front steps of the old house. She had bought a bulb, an Amaryllis, at the supermarket, something she could nurse into bloom to remind her of Southern holidays without snow and wind and the coldness of unfriendly people who didn't speak and wouldn't know how either to give or receive a compliment if their lives depended on it. She felt weary, "rode hard and put up wet" her late husband liked to say, as she opened her front door.

She looked to her right and saw two boys whispering near the porch railing. One of them was handing the other a plastic bag that contained white powder while accepting one of those new fifty-dollar bills that made Andrew Jackson look like he was having a bad hair day. Just as she was wondering what that was all about, a car careened around the corner from Forty-Third Street and a young man rolled down the window on the passenger side. He stuck a gun out of the window and began firing at the two boys on the porch.

As Mrs. Grimsley turned back toward the door to get inside, she felt a sharp pain in her lower back. She looked down as the bullet shot threw her into the door's leaded glass. Funny sensation, she

thought. Then a second bullet went through her neck and the headaches and tightened muscles gave way to unconsciousness.

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When the body arrived on the 6:08 from Atlanta, Dr. Prewitt and Don Essex stood on the battered platform that had served as a gathering pen for Yankee soldiers on their way to the hell of Milledgeville Prison a hundred and fifty-six years ago. In true Campbellite tradition, Dr. Prewitt arose at four o'clock every morning to read the King James Version and pray for each person in his congregation. Then, over coffee and homemade biscuits he would smoke his pipe and strategize ways to outwit his Staff-Parish Relations Committee. But this morning, he didn't go down to Mabel's Cafe to gossip with Joe Varnum and Shakey Shackelford. God would not, did not answer his questions about Margaret Grimsley's death by shooting. "Why, O Lord?" was met only by the divine silence he had experienced too many times.

As the coffin was loaded from the train to Don Essex's funeral hearse, Dr. Prewitt felt his neck muscles tighten and knew that a massive headache was about to paralyze him. He turned to the undertaker. "She was an unusually good woman. She always believed that she was a door of God's love to everyone, especially a stranger. I will never understand why she had to die so senselessly."

"One thing I have learned from all these funerals my daddy and my brothers and I have conducted in all these years," Don mused. We live by faith, by God's grace. All our good works are done in response to God's love. Mrs. Grimsley was one of those unique people who unlike most so-called Christians possessed not one ounce of self-righteousness and self-congratulation.

When someone like her dies, we have the opportunity to press our noses against the window of our faith each time to get a glimpse of the mysteries of God's love."