

Requiescat in Pace – Irene Ann Pickering
Romans 8:18-30
2 Corinthians 5:1-10
Luke 5:27-32

God works in mysterious ways. The phrase is not in the bible. It comes from a popular hymn written in 1773. The phrase has a well-deserved place in the cultural consciousness. God works in mysterious ways. It is certainly true. The idea can be misunderstood. It is not God's intent to be inscrutable. But neither does He operate according to human principles, human reason, human categories. Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord said this: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8-9). Humanity would not choose a crucified Messiah. Humanity would not choose humility and shame and suffering as the way for the Almighty to reveal His power, His glory, His eternal dominion – and yet, that is the wisdom of God. He operates in a way that we neither expect nor would construct on our own. God became man (John 1:14). That is a mystery. In him, (the Lord Jesus) all the fullness of the deity dwells bodily (Colossians 2:9). That is a mystery. God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise (1 Corinthians 1:27a). That is a mystery. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong (1 Corinthians 1:27b). That is a mystery.

God hauled Irene out of Ohio and brought her to So. Cal. because He wanted her to be a nurse, a Nurse Practitioner, because He wanted her to help people – body and soul. That is a mystery. God most certainly works in mysterious ways. The scope of Irene's life, the arc of her work, the trajectory that she rode to arrive where she did in life has mystery at its core. Irene and those around her knew that she was built for her vocation. In Westin, Ohio Irene certainly helped folks. But there was more for her to do for her community than to help them check out at the grocery store. God put it in her heart, her mind to be in medicine. That is a mystery. The tug, the pull, the impulse to assist others in the field of medicine – Irene had to answer it. The Bible teaches us that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28). That means that even the bad things that we endure, the hardship, the tribulation, the difficulties – God uses those as fuel, as raw material to produce the end product that He desires. In the OT, Joseph was beaten, left for dead, sold as a slave by his jealous brothers. Ultimately, Joseph rises to the seat of great power in Egypt and his brothers come needing food. The wise Joseph absolved his brothers saying this: You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good (Genesis 50:20). Joseph saw into the mystery.

Irene endured things that a young lass should not have to endure. How did God use it? All I know is what I saw in this woman – humility, courage, boldness, servitude, love, grace, fidelity. I was never her patient. What did her patients see? An angelic instrument of healing. The cultural caricature of strong women is not flattering. The cultural caricature of a strong woman is gruff, man-like, indignant, bossy, walking around with a perpetual chip on her shoulder, a short-fused hurricane. Is that your idea of a strong woman? Christian women – what an ideal witness to the culture. I'm sure that it's not easy. I have no idea how hard it is (and I'm not asking to be signed up). Irene was certainly comfortable in her Christian skin, her strong, feminine, Christian skin. This is the way it was put to me: She was happily deferential to Bob,

but there were exceptions. Bob was proud of her, stronger with her by his side. He worked tirelessly to get her through school. He regularly said that she was the smartest woman that he knew. How did Irene maintain a gentle spirit? In the midst of so much worldly prestige, so obviously gifted, how did Irene maintain a humble heart? Pride is a universal demon. Pride can corrupt anyone. Pride can lead one to betray one's strongest held beliefs. How did Irene stay rooted?

Jesus called a tax collector to be His disciple. Luke calls him Levi. You know him as Matthew. Matthew is overjoyed. I can imagine what a societal pariah thought about being asked to follow the most dynamic rabbi, the One who commanded the public's attention, the Teacher who taught with authority, who opened the eyes of the heart to see the majesty, the presence of God's grace, who clearly had God's imprimatur, who changed the lives of His hearers. Matthew was elated. Mired in darkness, Matthew was called into the Light. Matthew was sick. And the Good Physician saw him, tended him, opened God's kingdom to him. The religiously uptight were offended. They were offended because someone like Matthew shouldn't have access to what is holy. Jesus was the guest of honor at Matthew's home and there were all sorts of questionable types who were breaking bread with this much-talked-about rabbi. "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" (Luke 5:30).

Irene helped people because they were sick. Irene stayed grounded because she was ministered to, she was tended by the One who wasn't appalled at her condition. She knew it. The sin that is committed against us is as much a source of shame and potential isolation as the sin that we commit. Our own accusing conscience can sometimes make us believe that we deserved the ill treatment that we have received. It's a lie. Satan sows that lie to keep us from the One in whom we find genuine healing. Jesus didn't establish an artificial perimeter around Himself in order to protect the holiness that was His. He answered those who would have done as much this way: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:31-32). Do you see how inclusive that statement is? There is no one who is righteous, no not even one (Romans 3:10). It may sound strange to you, and I don't know it for sure, but everyone was a potential patient for Irene. Her kids friends, the neighbors, church folk, the lady at the grocery store, the guy in line at the movie theater – everyone. Don't you think that is how our Lord Christ approached all those He came across. Those are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick. The bottom line is that we are all sick.

The way that the Good Physician healed those in need is that He took their sicknesses, their diseases, their lust and their greed and their pride and their death. God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21). It was a blessed exchange, a sweet swap. Oh, but for Jesus, it was a wretched business. The punishment that brought us peace was upon Him. By His stripes we are healed (Isaiah 53:5). Irene knew it. She drew strength from it. Christ's love defined her. Christ's sacrifice defined her. Christ's forgiveness defined her. That's what kept her grounded, humble, resilient, self-giving.

At University I studied psychology (I don't recommend it). Theology is higher ground. I hope that that doesn't sound immodest. Abraham Maslow had a theory of "self-actualization" which

may still be standard reading for undergrads studying psychology. It was based what he called a “hierarchy of needs” which is a pyramid kind of structure. At the bottom is basics (food, water, shelter), next level up is safety (security and stability). Humans supposedly come closer to realizing their potential the higher they climb this pyramid. Next level up focuses on relationships (love and sense of belonging). The penultimate level is esteem (respect for self and others). Finally, the top level is self-actualization or realizing one’s potential. Of course, this paradigm is godless as most things in psychology are. What would you say is the Christian substance of that theory on self-actualization?

Try this: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Yep, that’s it. The fruit of Spirit – that is the authentic apex of life of Christ. Jesus said: “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit” (John 15:5). Jesus served Irene with His life and that is what generated the fruit in our sister. Irene received Christ’s ministry to her and it produced great fruit. She was grateful. There is no other explanation for a life so well lived. The union between Christ and His church is called “the mystical union” by theologians. The bond is empirically imperceptible but real. God works in mysterious ways. Irene is evidence. She was ready to come home. Much about death is a mystery to us in this holy house. It’s not to Irene. She is home. The arc of Christ’s life has brought her to heaven.