

Requiescat in Pace ~ Elsie Alma Albanese

1 Samuel 2:1-10

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

Matthew 5:1-12

We learn as children. Our character is forged as children. I believe it. This is not to say that episodes later in life don't refine us, they certainly do. A child's character is not formed in concrete, an inescapable hardness that isn't refashioned as we age. But we, in fact, learn as youngsters. Elsie's father was a unique teacher. Charity, grace, compassion, humility – great men, great women make for great teachers. Adversity is a great teacher. Observing how our parents assist others in adversity is a great teacher. Elsie learned well. Christian Schiller, a very German man, owned two markets. Christian was Elsie's dad. He was successful. He was a churchman, a community-oriented man who frequently helped those in need. Elsie saw it. In Elsie's community those in need knew who to visit. God teaches us in a multitude of ways. Elsie learned compassion, dignity, selfless concern for others and host of other virtues in the thirties and forties. Life wasn't all roses in the 1930's and '40's, especially for German-Americans. Elsie's dad wasn't just a soft touch; he was proactive in assisting those in need – food and money – and as he tended the needs of his community Elsie learned. Later in life Elsie was told, "If not for your dad, we would've starved."

Rich people can be snobs. Something in our sinful nature lies to the rich and tells them that they are above others. It happens; and not just to the wealthy. Elsie didn't take herself too seriously. Elsie didn't take *life* too seriously. She held life lovingly. Elsie enjoyed the life that God gave her and cheerfully gave of herself to others. She wasn't weighed down by stress or negativity or minor problems. Elsie was supremely natural. She approached life with a sense of humor; she was relaxed and her manner was disarming to those in her company. We all know the stereotypical New Yorker frame of mind – caustic, acerbic, sharp-tongued. I went to see Elsie in the hospital. I love telling this story. Being in the hospital is no picnic. Elsie was north of 90 and this wasn't her first stay – there'd been a few at that point. I greeted her and asked her how she was doing. Now conjure up in your mind what a typical New Yorker might say. "You goofy pastor, look at where I am! How do you think I'm doing?" She could've said that and I would've laughed my head off because it would've been so out of character. What she said was priceless. Elsie looked at me and said: "A little good."

Hannah's song, a cheerful giver, and the beatitudes are wonderful accents of Christian character. The beatitudes are a self-revelation. Jesus tells us about Himself as He recounts one statement of blessedness after another. Blessedness is never an achievement. We can't manufacture blessedness by virtue of our behavior. Grace, God's operation in the life of the sinner, is how we become blessed. We love because He first loved us (1 John 4:19). The Lord Christ is the living vine and we are branches attached to that vine (John 15:5). The fruit of Christ's character is laden upon the lives of Christians because God is at work in us to will and to act according to His good purpose (Philippians 2:13). A cheerful giver is almost universally understood as a monetary gesture. I ask you to enlarge your perspective on what it means to be a "cheerful giver." "Whoever sows sparingly will reap sparingly" (2 Corinthians 9:6). Did Jesus begrudge giving up His life or did He lay down His life willingly (John 10:18)? Do you think that He was hesitant to save us from our sins (Hebrews 12:2)? Did he endure a radical mockery, a radical

abuse, a radical penalty for our pride and our selfishness and our greed and our deceit and our hate and our perversity? God the Father poured out His wrath on His Son. Did Jesus sow His blood sparingly? Jesus said: "I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). The only way that we have life, abundant life, is for Jesus to be a cheerful Giver.

Elsie knew that Jesus gave all that He was and had for her. What kind of spirit do you suppose that engendered in her? Elsie learned as a child what the cross meant. By virtue of her parents, her community was a churchly community, a faithful community, a community that was devoted to Christ and His Word. That made Elsie a cheerful giver. Imagine Hannah. She was barren. She prayed for a child. She wept bitterly over her childless circumstance. And the Lord remembered Hannah (1 Samuel 1:19). Hannah was the cheerful giver who gave her son Samuel to the Lord. What do we give? What has the Lord given to us that we give to others?

I suspect that most of you spent a great deal of time with Elsie. She was a spitfire, a woman who knew how to stand on her own two feet. She was self-giving; her eyes sparkled when she spoke to others (and those conversations were very seldom about herself). She told me that she loved me regularly. She was a good listener. She was an authentic listener. It is common for us to bemoan our trials. Whenever she was in the midst of difficulty, Elsie just wanted to move forward. Such a frame of mind is based on trust. Do you believe that trust moves us forward? God's plan, not mine. God's love, not mine. God's power, not mine. God's suffering, not mine. God's empty tomb. *And* mine.

I don't know how many of you have had your homes worked on by contractors. Contractors have a language all their own. Monday means Tuesday, next week means three weeks from now, "sure, I can do that" means either "I have no idea how to do that" or "that will cost you an extra \$1000." A thief dying next to Jesus asked to be remembered. "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Luke 23:42). That man was suffering. Humanly speaking, he was totally alone, an object of cruelty masquerading as justice. To the Man crucified beside him, he speaks a humble prayer (remember me), a simple prayer (remember me), a forlorn prayer (remember me). Does that thief trust? Did He die trusting in the God crucified beside him to save him?

God's Word creates faith. Faith comes by hearing and hearing through the Word of Christ (Romans 10:17). Our Lord Himself, pierced and suffering and praying for the forgiveness of those who crucified Him, spoke directly to the thief. "Truly, I say to you, *today* you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). Today! Humanly speaking, I don't know how alone I will be when I die. Neither do any of you. Elsie, in the days before her death, was surrounded by family. But there was more. The Lord Christ was with Elsie. For He has said, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you... For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior" (Isaiah 43:1-3). Elsie's Confirmation Verse was Matthew 28:20 – I am with you always, even unto the end of the age. Today, you will be with me in Paradise. The Lord claimed Elsie when she was baptized into His death and resurrection in November of 1932. His triumph over sin and death is what washed her and made her new. With great devotion, Elsie hearkened to Christ's voice in His church. Did the thief on the cross trust with a great trust as He died? Did Elsie? That's what I saw. I know that for our

Lord “Today” means today. On July 25th, Elsie was brought to Paradise, brought home, brought to heaven.

“A little good”; when I asked her how she was doing, that’s what she said. I’ve never heard it before, and I’ll never hear it again. I realize that it’s obvious but let me break it down for you. Elsie didn’t focus on her difficulty, but she focused on what was positive, however small that might be. Do you know who profited the most from Elsie’s disposition? Ed Albanese. Elsie came from money. Ed, not so much. Elsie was German. Ed was Italian. Elsie was Lutheran. Ed was Roman Catholic. Like so many of us menfolk, Ed married up. The book of Proverbs has this priceless line: “A wife of noble character, who can find? She is far more precious than jewels” (Proverbs 31:10). Elsie’s father taught her, “never act like you’re better than anyone.” We learn as children. But Christ forms our character throughout life. Christ makes us blessed by giving us His character throughout life. Marriage is sharing Christ’s character with one another. Elsie and Ed are in heaven. Christ’s character permeates those in heaven. That is truly what it means to be blessed. Let us treasure the blessings we receive from our Lord as we walk through this life in faith. Let us fix our eyes, our trust, our hope on reaching the Fatherland, our new Eden, the kingdom of heaven prepared for us from the foundation of the world. As we walk through this life in faith, remember, He remembers *us* and when “today” arrives we will be with Him in Paradise.