

Newsletter Reflection for October

The Presbyterian Outlook published by our denomination has the stated focus of leading faithful conversations in the church and beyond. Articles there are about events happening in various congregation near and far—it has educational features about church life and more. In the September 4th edition, there were two articles which I would like to reflect on. First is an article by a fellow Union Presbyterian Seminary classmate—Charmaine Smith-Miles; the second is a book review. Charmaine journeyed up from South Carolina every Saturday for classes at Union while she continued working as a reporter for her hometown newspaper. Her articles feature stories about everyday people. This particular article is titled: “A light in the window”. It is about the life and remembrances of Mrs. Hazel Sparks. It begins with biographical information—Mrs. Sparks grew up in Charlotte and spent teenage years in Montreat. During WWII, while at Montreat she encountered a medical missionary who returned home to practice and serve as pastor because of the war. His name was Nelson Bell. Mrs. Sparks remembers going by his house in Black Mountain, seeing the light on in his study and knowing that he was up and praying for his world and the students at Montreat. She relates how important it was for her to know that he was praying for her. Each Sunday our bulletin lists the names of folks that we know or folks that are friends of those we know. They have requested our prayers. Often we may not know specific reasons for their requests—but we know they feel a need for prayers to be lifted on their behalf. As we see those names, do we recognize how important the knowledge that they are being lifted in prayer may be to them? How the deep sense of being part of a community held together in faith can give comfort and hope to those on that list. Mrs. Sparks also talks about how important her foundation in faith was to shaping her and her life. This foundations was gained through studying God’s word and through mentors in her church family—the community of faith around her which also sustained her through difficult times. This year the women’s Bible study is called *Cloud of Witnesses: The Community of Christ in Hebrews*. Hebrews 12: 1—“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.” We all can identify those whose lives have touched and mentored us in our faith; those in the great cloud of witness who shaped us. We need to also remember that we are part of that cloud of witnesses. The article tells us how this woman served in her church and community of faith by teaching and by example—just as she had been served. Mrs. Sparks is now 90 and is no longer actively teaching in the public schools or her church, but she is still involved in ministry with a home small group Bible study. Two of her quotes from this article are worth sharing. First, “Even at 90, this decaying body is still growing spiritually. I have found that I don’t have to know all the answers. I just have to know where to look for some of those answers.” After all this time, she says, she is still learning. The second quote seems related to the first—her resource for finding answers. “God tells us over and over again in the Psalms to put his words upon our hearts. There may be a time when you

don't have a Bible. The war taught us that. It is easier to live by something that is in your heart than something that is written on a page." Praying and studying the Word so that our hearts are bound together in relationships with God and each other—those seem like ways that we see the light in the window and that we can become the light in the window for each other.

The second article from this Outlook edition is a one page book review. The book is titled: *The Altars Where We Worship: The Religious Significance of Popular Culture*, by Juan M. Floyd-Thomas, Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas and Mark G. Toulouse (WJK). The review quotes a sentiment attributed to Karl Barth, a 20th century Reformed theologian. "We are to proceed with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other." In this day of media and internet, the newspaper is no longer the primary source of information about our culture, but the context is the same use Scripture in context of this world. Things in our culture—things which surround us cannot be ignored as we try to live faithful lives of discipleship. The Reformed tradition always makes us aware of the dangers of idolatry— allowing things other than our Lord to be the most important factor in our lives. John Calvin said that humanity was an idol making factory. Even earlier Jesus Christ pointed out where "our treasure" is there also would be our hearts. Our faith struggles often have to do with "idols" which we allow into our lives; altars at which we worship. This book's goal is to increase awareness of how the realms of cultural experience are not merely diversions or entertainments, but deeply rooted spheres of meaning which we value with their own heroes and anti-heroes, practices and norms. The question asked within this book is: "Where are Americans finding meaning within their lives, if not in the practices and contexts provided by traditional religions?" These authors point to the culture around us; at the almost devout attention given to professional sports teams, college sports, entertainment celebrities, etc. Human beings can make idols out of anything, the question is: Where is the altar at which we worship?

Shalom,

Pastor Libby