

Eulogy for Louise Myrtle Petty

We're here today to celebrate the life of an amazing woman, my Gramma, Louise Myrtle Petty.

Gramma was 92 years old. She was preceded in death by her husband Moses Eugene Petty who I called "Pappy;" her father and mother, John McKay and Susie Bell McKay who I called "Momma Susie;" and two siblings, Joe Dick McKay and Elsie Thrash. She is survived by her only child, Daphene Vining, and me, her only grandchild.

I hardly ever cry at funerals of loved ones because I have a strong sense of the afterlife and, for some reason, on the day of their funerals I feel their presence in heaven and can feel all the joy they feel. If you sit real still and take a deep breath I'll bet you can feel it, too. Heaven isn't a place "out there," so much as it is found in the still, small voice of our own spirit.

Gramma was born in 1916, grew up in Leesburg, Mississippi and by all accounts she must've been an unstoppable force of nature. She played basketball and tennis. She was the first-born child of three and her daddy evidently spoiled her rotten. He bought her a horse. But one day Gramma jumped over two people sitting in a horse-drawn wagon, and her daddy sold that horse!

Gramma went to college in a day when very few women did. She had a couple of bad marriages, but she had the strength to survive and raise my Mom as a single mother. She owned and ran a restaurant, which, as anyone who's ever worked in a restaurant knows, is really hard work. Gramma said of that restaurant that she "saw it one day, bought it the next day and regretted it the next." One good thing came of that

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restaurant, though. That's where she met my Pappy, the only grandfather I ever knew. Pap was a tank sergeant under Patton and Bradley in WWII, and he was a regular at the restaurant. Mom picked out Pap for Gramma and encouraged her to date him—which, after two bad marriages, took some persuading. Gramma and Pap were married for 38 years.

Gramma absolutely loved to fish. She and Pap spent their honeymoon fishing at Eagle Lake. When my Mom was growing up and other kids would be out on a date, she'd be in a boat, holding a flashlight over Gramma's pole for late-night fishing at Legion Lake. And when they dammed the Pearl River to make the Ross Barnett Reservoir, Gramma knew she'd found her home. She and Pap bought one of the first lots at Lake Harbor, where they lived for over 30 years. They also helped build—literally, because Pap was a carpenter—Lake Harbor Baptist Church where I attended Vacation Bible School every summer.

I can't leave here today without acknowledging how much Gramma contributed to my Christian faith. My great grandmother Momma Susie taught me to read at three years of age and used the King James Bible as my primer. But Momma Susie wasn't the only one who made sure I read my Bible; my Gramma did, too. I think her proudest moment was when I preached my first sermon and brought her a tape to listen to in the nursing home. I said, "They seemed to enjoy my sermon, Gramma." And she said, "It doesn't matter how much they liked it; what matters is whether you brought the Word!"

As the years progressed, Gramma actually became a professional fisherwoman. She tested experimental baits for the Fred Abergaster company, wrote articles for Field and

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Stream, and was even a regular on the WLBT news fishing report. Gramma always seemed to know where the hot bream and crappie beds were, but now that she's gone I'll finally reveal her secret: she didn't find those bream and crappie beds, she made them! She used to round up used Christmas trees every year so she could tie croaker sacks of cotton meal around them and dump them in the Reservoir late at night. She'd also cut the ends out of several cans of dog food, string them together with a fish stringer, and dump them in the Reservoir when no one was looking.

We're also here today to learn from the life of this amazing woman. About six months ago, hospice told my Mom and me that Gramma would likely die any day. I told them I'd believe it when I saw it because I knew my Gramma better than they did and, by all rights, she should've died lots of times. When I was in law school, she suffered a massive paralyzing stroke than should've killed her on the spot. She suffered dozens of smaller strokes after that; had heart attacks, diabetes and she had an inoperable hernia. When my Dad was dying of leukemia he looked to my Gramma for inspiration because her will to live was the strongest he'd ever known.

And that brings us to the theological part of this eulogy. The question I'd like to ask today is this: what motivates someone to fight so hard for life as my Gramma did? I don't think my Gramma was afraid of dying. She accepted Jesus as her Savior long ago and fully believed there's a heaven; but it's not exactly like she "had her bags packed" ready to go there. Why, then? If heaven is such a wonderful place, why did she hang on so hard to a world that, especially in the end, seemed to bring her nothing but suffering? How strange a person was she, when so many Christians these days long for the rapture so they can write off the world entirely.

As you can probably tell, I've never been a fan of John Darby's rapture eschatology. In my view, the rapture lacks biblical support, it is found nowhere in the writings of the early church fathers, and, worst of all, it promotes a Gnostic metaphysics and "flight from life" brand of Christianity that has troubled the Church since its inception. My Gramma was certainly not a "flight from life" type of Christian. In fact she loved life so much she seemed unable to let go of it. But is this a good thing?

I think it is. In Romans 5, versus 13 and 14 the apostle Paul argued that but for sin there would be no mortal death. This idea has very profound implications. For example, process theologian Charles Hartshorne noted that in ordinary beings universality and individuality are opposed. But this is one of the very rules to which God as worshipful or unsurpassable must be an exception. Hartshorne called this "the" question of natural theology. Likewise, physical immortality can be explored philosophically using the categories of *essence* and *existence*. The essence of a thing is what the thing is; existence refers to the sheer fact that the thing is. Thomas Aquinas noted that in all things except God there is a real difference between the thing's essence and its existence. A mortal man is not his essence, since if he were—if essence and existence were identical in him—it would be of his essence to exist, and he would never die. Thus, in order to attain physical immortality *one must become equal to God in every important respect*. Or, to express it in traditional Christian terms, one must join Jesus as a perfect partner in the Incarnation.

How does one join Jesus as a perfect partner in the Incarnation? To begin with, it is not enough that we ask Jesus to forgive our sins so we can keep on sinning. Jesus commanded us, "Therefore, be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Mt

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5:48). Jesus came into this world not only to forgive our sins (something we are incapable of doing for ourselves) he came also to teach us the mystery of eternal life. And that is why he'll come again. Paul wrote in his First Letter to the Corinthians that in the end "God will be all in all" (1 Cor 15:28), at which point "the last enemy to be destroyed is death" (1 Cor 15:26).

That, I submit, is why my Gramma struggled to live so long; not because she was afraid to die or didn't believe in heaven, but because she rightly understood that physical death, theologically speaking, *is an unnatural thing*. There will come a day, and I believe that day is coming soon, when we will no longer look forward to joining our loved ones in heaven. Rather, we will look forward to our loved ones joining us here on earth in the general resurrection so that we may all enjoy life everlasting. There will be a new heaven and a new earth, and we'll all have glorified bodies that never grow old. Yes, my Gramma is with my Dad and Pappy in heaven, and yes, they're probably fishing. But maybe, just maybe, the day will come soon when they'll join my Mom and me to go fishing again; not in heaven, but right here at Lake Mary Crawford or at the Ross Barnett Reservoir.

May the Peace of the Lord that passes all understanding be with you all.