

CLIFFORD'S GARDENIAS

Homily offered in celebration of the life of Clifford Jewett Swift, III, April 8, 1938 – December 31, 2021, on January 5, 2022 at Parkhill Cemetery. Scripture readings: Isaiah 25:6-9, Psalm 139:1-12, I John 3:1-2, Psalm 116:1-9 and 14-15, John 11:21-27.

It has been one of the great privileges of my life to be Clifford and Bobsie's priest for nearly eight years now. They were among the first people to welcome me to St. Thomas and offer support and encouragement. I did nothing to deserve their kindness and trust, but they graciously invited me into their lives. They were clear from the beginning that they wanted me and St. Thomas to succeed, and I will always be grateful.

As a result, I thought I knew Clifford fairly well. I knew he was a devoted husband to Bobsie for 48 years. I knew he loved his family. I knew he was a whiz with numbers and details. I knew he was highly respected in his career at CB&T as a person of great integrity and trust. I knew he was reliable. I knew he golfed a bit. I knew he collected breakable things. I knew he supported music and the arts, but I also knew Bobsie enjoyed those pursuits more than he did. I knew he was proud of Bobsie's needlework. I knew he liked driving his pickup truck occasionally but liked sharing it even more. I knew he did not like to stay too late at a party. I knew he was a serious and dedicated churchman, serving on vestries and committees and at the altar at Trinity downtown and Good Shepherd in Cashiers and St. Thomas Episcopal churches. I knew he cared about the future of Columbus and the future of St. Thomas. I knew he was quietly generous, that he invested in this community with the same intentionality he brought to his own investments, but he did not like to make a big show of it. I knew he thought it highly important to treat all people equally. I knew he walked the walk, proclaiming by word and example the good news of God in Christ, which is one of the promises we make in baptism.

So, I knew a lot about Clifford. However, in talking with Bobsie and Carlton on Sunday afternoon, I learned something I had not known. In addition to all of the above, Clifford Jewett Swift, III was a serious gardener for many years of his life.

He and Bobsie were living in their current home by the time I came to Columbus, so I never saw his previous garden. Bobsie and Carlton told me about it. He had over fifty rose bushes. Roses are hard work. They require someone with Clifford's disposition, someone patient and detail-oriented and disciplined. And, in addition

to the roses, Clifford cultivated and shared a large, bountiful gardenia that now blooms all over town.

I understand from Bobsie that Clifford's gardenias were originally his sister Lucille's gardenias. As I heard the story, Clifford's family received a bouquet of gardenias as a gift when Lucille was born in Charleston. The gift ended up in a cabinet, as often happens when a new baby joins the family. The family left town for a while. When they returned, they opened the cabinet and were surprised to find that the gardenias had rooted. When they moved back to Columbus, they brought some of the gardenias and planted them here. Lucille's gardenias liked Columbus soil and grew remarkably well. Clifford eventually put some in his own yard and gave cuttings to many people. According to Bobsie, Clifford's gardenias are all over Columbus. They all came from a few stems that were forgotten in a cabinet.

I think that plant from childhood became a parable that guided Clifford's life. A beautiful, bountiful, fragrant flower grew from a few stems his family nearly threw away.

At some point in his life, Clifford came to realize that what happened to a bunch of gardenias from his childhood could also happen to people and communities. Beautiful things can grow from what many people might neglect or throw away.

Clifford appears to have put this lesson into practice in small ways. He would often give rides and cash to people he saw walking on the side of the road. He noticed people others might not always notice.

Once when Bobsie was out of town, Clifford noticed a colony of cats in the neighborhood. It was getting cold, and he got concerned about them. He set up the garage as a cat hotel, complete with heating pads and water dishes.

Throughout his life, Clifford nurtured people and animals and plants others might have forgotten. He trusted that with a little attention, forgotten and neglected things could thrive.

He also put this lesson into practice in wider ways. At a time when many people may have thought Columbus was a less-than exciting place to be, Clifford moved back and devoted his life to making this community bloom.

He supported many causes, but particularly those that helped forgotten things and people blossom. He supported Historic Columbus and the Columbus Museum so that future generations would not forget where we come from, the good and the difficult. He supported the Schwob School of Music and their mission to provide

high-caliber music education for public university students in a city that is often treated as an afterthought in Georgia. He supported CVEM, Chattahoochee Valley Episcopal Ministry, which works every day to help our neighbors know they have not been forgotten. He supported foster care and Mercy Med and other groups working with forgotten people. He supported St. Thomas, not just with his money but with his presence and leadership and ideas.

My dad kept a poster on his office wall that said, “Bloom where you are planted.” I have always taken that as an encouragement to make your own life fruitful in any circumstance. Clifford must have seen a different poster somewhere. “Where you are planted, help things bloom.”

All of the scriptures Bobsie chose for us to hear today are fitting. We are here because of our confidence in the resurrection, which Martha proclaimed. We are here to praise with the psalmist the God who watches over the innocent, and who now invites Clifford to turn again to his rest. We are here because Clifford was a beloved child of God, as described in I John, and he sought to share that love with others. We are here because Clifford knew he was fearfully and wonderfully made.

But I particularly appreciate the passage selected from Isaiah. A vision of abundant life was being invoked on a particular place. As background, these words are from the first part of Isaiah, likely written when Assyria was laying siege to Jerusalem. Assyria had captured and destroyed the kingdom of Israel to the north. They then attacked Jerusalem in the south. Food supplies were cut off. The only reason anyone survived was because King Hezekiah dug a tunnel to bring in fresh water.

Isaiah’s community was about to be destroyed and thrown on the trash heap of history. But the prophet trusted that God was not through with them. God would be able to make something bloom in this nearly-forgotten place. The prophet envisioned a victory feast when everyone would live in peace.

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food . . . And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples. He will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces,

Clifford Swift lived with a prophet’s eye. He had a prophet’s vision for this community.

In this valley, the Lord will make for all people a feast of healthy food shared in caring homes surrounded by beautiful music.

The Lord will destroy in this valley the gaps between rich and poor, our blindness toward our neighbors. The Lord will swallow up wrongdoing and pain.

Then the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces. And this community will thrive in joy.

Clifford quietly cultivated that kind of hope. He believed that people and places and cats and causes that might otherwise be neglected, could still thrive.

One last word from the scriptures. Jesus said the kingdom of God is like a tiny mustard seed which grows into a tree. It is like yeast which gets mixed with flour and makes the whole loaf rise.

He could also have said the Kingdom of God is like a gardenia which someone threw in the trash and now blooms everywhere.

Thanks be to God for people who quietly tend to the work of God in our midst, people like Clifford Jewett Swift, III. May his soul and the souls of all the departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace.

+ + +

The Rev. Grace Burton-Edwards, D.Min.

St. Thomas Episcopal Church

2100 Hilton Ave.

Columbus, GA 31906

StThomasColumbus.org