

## The Pilgrimages to Aberdeen

Patrick J. Willson, in his book *Deep Gratitude*, tells the story of a friend who began his ministry at little First Baptist Church in Aberdeen, Mississippi. His first year as pastor, he was visited by three men inquiring about one of his members, a widow who lived by herself.

Was she getting out? Were her friends in Aberdeen keeping in touch? Was there anything they needed to know?

The three men explained the situation, giving him their cards. One lived in New Jersey, another in Oklahoma, and the other in California. The preacher was told to call them if there was anything they could humanly do to make her life happier or easier.

These three men arrived each year, bringing presents their wives had picked out in the shops of their hometowns. The men had hired a family who mowed the woman's yard, trimmed the bushes, and checked on tree branches and gutters. One of the men prepared the woman's tax returns each year, another contracted repairs on her house or made them himself.

Sometimes, they helped her shop for a new car. They were meticulous in wanting to check on everything and anticipate every difficulty the woman might face. Each year, they visited the president of the Bank of Mississippi in Aberdeen. Since there was a regular turnover in young bank executives, the men passed out their cards with instructions to notify them of any worldly need this woman might have, and explained the situation to the bank president.

And this was the situation: 60 years ago, the three men had been three soldiers standing on the ground floor of a house in Normandy, just a few days after D-Day, when a German potato masher grenade came bouncing down the stairs. A fourth soldier – the woman's husband – threw himself on the grenade, absorbing most of its impact. The three men lived because of his death.

After the war was over in 1945, the three men began making their way to Aberdeen on a regular basis to make sure that this man's widow would lack for nothing that they had within their power to provide for her. They had been doing that for more than 25 years when Willson's friend was pastor of First Presbyterian Church.

Isn't that a remarkable story? Well, here is another remarkable thing: There were 18 soldiers on the first floor of that house in Normandy. All 18 of them were spared by the action of that one soldier's leaping on a grenade, and after the war was over, only three of them made their regular pilgrimages to Aberdeen, Mississippi.

Three of 18? That is 16.67 percent of that group who showed their gratitude to this woman whose husband had given his life for them.

What does it take for us to recognize that life is a gift, and the only possible human response is gratitude?

*Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends (John 15:13 ESV).*

– Beecher Hunter