

Audrey Lane Rivers
March 10, 2018

It is fitting that, as we give thanks for the life and witness of God's servant Audrey Rivers, we do it by gathering around a table. One of my earliest and fondest memories of Audrey is sitting at her kitchen table, being recruited to become a Trustee of the Kindred Spirits Charitable Trust. In other words, I was being leaned on, but in a nice Christian way.

At that table, Audrey's compassion for prisoners on Death Row and their families was as transparent as glass, and more convincing than any argument that could have been made by a skilled attorney-at-law. She had me from the start. The homemade soup she served along with her appeal didn't hurt her cause.

Perhaps you remember Audrey at some other table, signing Christmas cards, perhaps, or adding her name to a petition, and, of course, at the family dinner table. Hers was a table of welcome. A table of inclusion. A table of hospitality.

Audrey died unexpectedly. The stroke she suffered last Sunday robbed us of the opportunity to thank her for the light she brought into our lives –

- for that card with one of Lee's photographs that arrived in the mail to cheer us up, or to console us after we had lost a loved one;
- for those handwritten notes of encouragement and support;
- for the letters to the editor she wrote to prod our consciences.

Audrey was soft-spoken and self-deprecating, but we must not mistake gentleness for weakness. Beneath that Hossford-born church lady with the gentle southern accent was a core of steel and a zeal for justice to equal that of any Old Testament prophet.

Back in 2005, as Christmas was approaching, Audrey was anticipating the deaths of two of her friends. She wrote to the *Tallahassee Democrat*. Her letter appeared on December 26th. In part, it read,

At this season . . . Not . . . many people are aware of the kind of pain that the families of two Florida prisoners are bearing right now. On November 29, the Governor signed two death warrants, scheduling the execution of Clarence Hill . . . and Arthur D. Rutherford. For their families, these are days of dread and horror. Nothing under the sun will be made better by these executions . . .

Audrey understood, better than most theologians, the connection between the birth of the Prince of Peace and his death by capital punishment. Her deep faith in Jesus Christ was the well from which flowed her compassion for those whom Jesus called **“the least of these, my brothers and sisters.”**

Some Christians give Christianity a bad name by the way they treat outsiders, immigrants, and people of another faith, or of no faith at all. Audrey was different. Her faith prompted her to love the unloved, to touch the untouchable, to broaden, not narrow, the circle of her friendships.

Lee, Audrey's husband of 50 years, used to remind Kerry, Beth, and Ad that they would never know just how many other people thought of their Mom as a mother to them, too.

Indeed, if all those who have felt mothered by Audrey were present today, this old sanctuary would be bursting at the seams. I count myself amongst that blessed multitude.

Even as we grieve Audrey's death, we rejoice this day in her life, and in the good gifts God gave her – the gifts she shared so generously. We take solace in the promises of the Gospel and the hope of glad reunion in the life to come.

The Spirit of God came upon the prophet Isaiah and upon the prophet Jesus

**to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives
and release to the prisoners
to comfort all who mourn.**

May that same Spirit of God bless us and all who loved Audrey, and empower us to be guided by all that was good and kind and faithful in her example. May God grant us

**the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.**

To the God who claimed Audrey in baptism, who walked with her all her life, and who welcomes her home to join the company of the saints in light, be honor, glory, and praise now and forever.

Amen.