

Message: Park Church Summer Worship July 17, 2011

Good Morning. I'm very pleased to be with you in worship today. I began thinking about today's message when Wendy Hovey asked me to contribute to this year's Lenten Booklet back in November or December. She told me the theme was "The Church in My Life, My Life in the Church." I wasn't sure I could respond to that. I hadn't attended Park Church for several years. Lynn VanAtta and I had been spending Sunday mornings at the Quaker meeting on 6th Street in Elmira, until Lynn's brain disease made it impossible for her to travel to worship. In my mind, I no longer had a church in my life, or a life in the church. But Wendy can be very persuasive, and so I finally found something to write about. I hope some of you won't mind hearing it again.

I titled it "Wherever One or Two are Gathered"

For the past several years, I have spent most of my Sunday mornings at the Church of Lynn. Its sanctuary is half of a double room at the Founders Pavilion nursing facility in Corning. Its patron saint is Lynn VanAtta, my friend for over thirty years, although she would snort at any notion of saintliness.

Lynn suffers from a degenerative brain disorder that has gradually stolen her vision, her mobility, and her sense of time and space. She is tethered to the world by the ministrations of her caregivers and the daily visits of family and friends. Each of us has staked ourselves to a portion of Lynn's week, when we arrive to share food and conversation, to read words of wisdom and comfort, to laugh over old stories.

My time is Sunday morning. I wend my way through the wheelchairs clustered by the third floor nurses' station and arrive at room 306. Whether she is in bed or in the geriatric chair that holds her head and body steady, Lynn's face beams at the sound of my greeting.

Her eyes are often lidded or fully closed; Lynn sees without them. Her world is lit from within by little joys and epiphanies: the tart taste of apple on her tongue, a snatch of song from the past, the memory of a day on the beach with her beloved granddaughters.

This is my worship. To be in the presence of a soul growing ever closer to the light, whose illness has robbed her body of almost everything it can, save life itself, and acceptance, and grace in the face of terrible loss. A determination to live out her days with gratefulness for the things that remain.

It is in this presence that I approach my own best self. I am patient with Lynn's frequent confusions, tender with my words. I battle with her the fearful images that her ravaged brain generates. We make our way through the verses of "Amazing Grace." I sing her the song she loves by Libby Roderick:

*How could anyone ever tell you/ You were anything less than
beautiful?*

How could anyone ever tell you/ You were less than whole?

How could anyone fail to notice that your loving is a miracle?

These are our Sunday hymns. I place slices of clementine and bits of banana bread between Lynn's lips and slip some into my own mouth. This is our communion.

Jesus said, "Wherever one or two are gathered in my name, there I am with them." Throughout my life I have experienced the presence of God in a variety of places, both humble and grand. Right now my church is half of a double room on the third floor of Founders Pavilion in Corning, New York.

A little while after the Lenten Booklet was published, Felicity called me to tell me how much she liked my piece (which was a relief, because I thought the Holy Communion of clementines and banana bread might have been pushing it a little!) and to praise it as an example of authentic ministry. That gave me pause, because in my Church of Lynn I regarded myself as a congregant, not a minister.

I thought back to a laity empowerment program here at Park that many of us took part in called “Unwrapping Our Gifts.” During one of the sessions we wore nametags calling ourselves “Reverend Reed” and “Reverend Hovey,” “Reverend Scott” and so forth. It was a playful way to acknowledge that each of us is a minister in our own way to those around us, whether or not we’ve been to divinity school. We just have to claim our gifts.

Lynn is served by a host of ministers who don’t regard themselves as such. Her illness has taken its toll very slowly. For a long time she was able to live independently, even though her vision was failing. But she couldn’t drive anymore and she needed help with daily tasks. That’s when Bonnie Chollet, a friend of Lynn’s for close to 40 years, explored a program called “Share the Care.” It was developed by a woman named Sheila Warnock as a way to help a seriously ill friend without becoming overcommitted or overwhelmed. She organized a network of friends and relatives to share in the caregiving, and created a system of volunteer inventories, calendars, checklists, forms, practical advice, and shared stories. Her subsequent book and Share the Care website make it possible for others to replicate Sheila’s success.

Lynn’s Share the Care group was formed over six years ago from more than 20 volunteers whose contributions included driving Lynn to appointments, taking her shopping or out to eat, setting up her tape player, and looking in on her to be sure all was well. Every week a different “captain” inventoried Lynn’s needs for the week and found a volunteer who could help. Some of us could do more than others, but everyone could do something.

As her illness progressed, Lynn's needs grew to include help showering, dressing, eating, and getting ready for bed. She moved into an addition built onto daughter Kirsten's house and eventually to Founder's Pavilion.

Lynn's needs are more daunting today than they were when our Share the Care group began, but her ministers continue faithfully. Reverend Midge is the minister of good cheer and practical works who always gets Lynn to eat more lunch than she thinks she can. Reverend Wendy of the soothing voice reminds Lynn how safe and loved she is when her demons are getting the best of her. Reverend Joan, Lynn's crusty but soft-hearted roommate, keeps a listening ear cocked during Lynn's long and restless nights. Reverend Donna Homuth helps Lynn recall her days as a teacher and child advocate, and lets her know that her advice is still valued. Reverend Karen Lesky is the minister of optimism, whose very presence is sunshine in Lynn's room. Reverends Suzanne Maschmeyer and Debbie Allen bring the gifts of the spirit and remind Lynn that she is a beloved child of God.

Other ministers watch over Lynn as she sleeps, pray with her, read to her, rub her restless legs, advocate for her at Founders, and counsel and console one another when Lynn's suffering is too hard to watch. Every member of Share the Care shrugs off his or her own contribution as minor, but together they form a powerful ministry of love in the face of disease and despair.

Today's song and scriptures talk about being called by God and responding with whatever we can bring. Jesus reminds us that we love the Lord by loving our neighbor. Is it time for all of us to own our ministries?