

With Thanksgiving for the Life of
Greta Karen Hammonds
June 24, 1939 + September 9, 2016
Exodus 34:6-7a; Psalm 23; 1Cor 13:4-13;

This is about love. It's a gathering about love. It's ultimately about the love of God in Christ Jesus, as we'll say more later. But firstly you're here for love because you loved Greta or because she loved you. Those may be bonds of family, or chosen ties of friendship, or relationships with some sort of care, that you received or gave or even simply observed. Through that, in some way, this isn't general loveliness, but is the very specific love you connect with Greta.

Now, I'm at a disadvantage for only having met her once, and only knowing small bits from her sister Jean, so I'd like to hear maybe in a word or a sentence some of the ways you associate love with Greta. (*Things mentioned: family, she cried when I left home, marrying into a great family, she babysat my children, community table meals, the cat lady, potato salad.*)

I've heard she was giving, that she was very generous in sharing what she had and not keeping it for herself. I've heard she always gave hearts each year as Christmas presents, a sure symbol of love. I've heard she took care of her mother at the end of her life. I've heard she cared for our country and fellow citizens in working the polls. So there are these things to recall, memories to cherish, stories for telling and reminding each other in these days (and that's an important part of the reception and chance to share more of this after worship) and it's also for understanding that they continue to shape you, as you embody this love of Greta in an ongoing way.

This is some of what we heard in 1st Corinthians and why we heard it. It's most

common as a wedding reading, but with Greta we can see it as a frame for all of life in our relationships. This is how things are supposed to work and what our connections ought to be like.

Of course, it can also seem sort of idealized, that we're not always patient or kind and don't always do the right thing and sometimes just can't endure it. That is true for me, and I'm sure for you, and I know it was true for Greta, too, because it's unfortunately just how we are, just true for all of us, as much as we try and as good as we may be.

But that's also exactly why we heard the couple of brief Bible verses from Exodus, where there's sort of a message that if it were easy and we didn't have to keep struggling at it, then it wouldn't really be love. These verses where God models and promises love, steadfast love, love that lasts through the generations, and God can do that precisely because love must be slow to anger and faithful in striving for forgiveness, this kind of love from God is exactly because we need it.

This is the point in the Bible story leading up to these verses. God makes this strong declaration and promise at a surprising moment in the story; it comes just after the people had made the golden calf, that premier example of idolatry and turning away from God, and Moses was furious at them, and all of this even as they were right at the foot of Mount Sinai where God was giving them the 10 Commandments. Even with that direct and present reminder, still they could blow it.

But that sure wasn't the first time; it seemed all too natural for their history in this story. Before that golden calf, the people were complaining about wandering in the wilderness and grumbling about the miracle of manna that kept them nourished day after day. And before that, before the escape through the Red Sea and the plagues striking Pharaoh and all the

wonders of God's work to save them, of love as this ongoing salvation project, before that they were complaining even that they didn't want to be freed from slavery.

Which is all to say that these weren't easily loveable people. For all the blessings that surrounded them, they weren't always appreciative. As God is promising and practicing steadfast love through their generations, we can't help but notice they weren't especially holy or nice or smart. And all too often they could be lousy, nasty, curmudgeonly boneheads. But through their best and their not-so-good, God promised to love them anyway, and kept at it, with enduring patience and more.

That's true of love and Greta, as well, in all those things you named about her and so much more, for all the really remarkable care and tender affection, and also for when that fell short or fell apart for some reason. It's true in your relationships with her, maybe in very small ways or maybe really dominant ways. It's true in love that spreads throughout family and across the years.

And it's especially still true of God's love. See, we gather today because of love. We gather because love isn't the same as understanding all the answers, not the same as everything working out just how we wish, not the same as everything going right. But we gather because of love. We gather to celebrate relationships and what has gone well, of life well lived and enjoyed. We also gather to lament the things that haven't gone that way, most especially that you are separated from the love of Greta, and that there isn't any good, clear reason of why that is, of why she died now, or why any of us need to face the loss and pain of death.

But this love isn't an explanation or a solution. This love will lead Greta and you with

her into light and life, but in the meantime it goes through the darkness of the valley of the shadow of death, because that's what love does.

We gather because love endures. Just as we heard, it persists in promise to the thousandth generation. That means it's for Greta and her siblings. It's for her parents, back to old times in Stoughton, and beyond that back to Norway and wherever else. It's back to the very beginning, and it's also forward, to you six children of hers, and your families, and on to generations so distant yet to come.

And for all the interruptions and disruptions, for all the disappointments and desperations, for Greta and for yourself you may be faithfully confident that nothing now, nothing in your past, nothing yet to come will be able to separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus. For that amazing promise, all that's left is to say Amen.