

With Thanksgiving for the Life of
Eileen Grace Bolstad
20Nov1925+18Nov2016
Jn11:23-28; 2Cor9:6-15; Pss23&42

For my part, about all I can say at a moment like this is I wish I would've had more chance to know Eileen, had known the fullness of her life and gotten to share more directly in her benefits to this congregation.

Instead, I mostly knew her lament that she wasn't capable of those things anymore. Already that's a strong indicator of her personality and her value to this congregation and our lives. To have a 90-year-old lamenting she's no longer out digging in the garden really says something about her!

In spite of how vibrant I continued to find her, still she regularly apologized for her memory loss. That decline meant she couldn't do what she wanted, couldn't be involved how she'd like and care for others as she was used to or even tell stories of her beloved grandchildren as much as she wished.

While I missed out on part of this amazing woman in these last months of her long, beautiful life, I had glimpses of who Eileen had always been.

That strikes me, for example, in recalling two other funerals earlier this year. I was impressed that Eileen was still among friends visiting and caring for Irene Rasmussen, and she also was always eager to hear how Ruth Olson was doing when I visited them at Oakwood. She was still filled with her characteristic care, which had been part of relationships amid the life of circle and quilting and giving rides and providing food through the years for services exactly like today.

I've also clung to Susan's words claiming Eileen as both her gardening buddy and also her mentor or teacher. That parallel is richly

descriptive, that Eileen's teaching was never overbearing or anything, but was relational and joyful, as a buddy. In watching Susan interact with the Kids in the Garden this past summer, it felt like a glimpse or reflection of who Eileen also was in that role, cherishing the children as well as the soil and growth of plants. Kids in the Garden was somehow a best of both worlds—for Eileen's delight in young people and for the work of the land.

Even though in some ways it was so long ago, there was a lot about Eileen that continued to be tied to the land, continued to be a farmer. Susan described it as paired commitments to faith and to the earth. In conversations, I heard Eileen talk about farming and agriculture, not only with the love of a spouse in appreciating her husband's career, but also in who she was, in that farm up north and its hardworking roles and how that place drew them to return even in retirement. Moving to Madison to provide the opportunities for you children to grow up, as you've mentioned, was certainly a worthwhile decision, but even with that move Eileen remained rooted in the soil and identified with the farm.

That identity gave rise to a couple of the hymns and Bible readings for this service, plus the reflection that comes out from them. With farming imagery, we heard of sowing bountifully and gratefully reaping the harvest. We heard Jesus describe a grain of wheat buried in the soil, and how that symbolizes our lives.

Whether or not it was because of that farming background, Eileen embodied these metaphors extraordinarily. She sowed bountifully in life. She was not sparing in her relationships with you, never stingy or reluctant about her good works. She gave of herself, and just as the passage recognizes, this generosity has produced the fruit of abundant thanksgiving among us here. We, indeed, gather today to

celebrate with gratitude our benefit from Eileen's life. Even more, this isn't just about Eileen, but recognizes that the very presence of God was also embodied for us in her bounty and grace and cheer.

With that faithful dedication, we can pivot from Eileen's direct commitment to growth and soil and the earth to that paired commitment of hers to faith. We could note that the passage from 2nd Corinthians is often used in churches as we're talking about financial commitments. While Eileen helps us understand the broader stewardship of our whole lives—that our giving is about our shared actions and attitudes and the fullness of how we encounter each other and the earth—still in the much narrower financial sense, I just want to mention that among the notes and plans that Eileen had written for the end of her life, Peter shared that she made special instruction that her pledge to this congregation should be paid completely for the year. Again, it's only one mark of her broader life, but it shows her passion and concern and dedication for faith as it continues to be lived out in this place.

Also for this moment and bearing fruit even in death, the words from Jesus are the last time he speaks in public in the Gospel of John before his own death. He proclaims his own burial is like a seed that will rise to bear fruit, and also that his death somehow glorifies and praises God.

These are hard tensions to hold and describe for Eileen. She was so vibrant and spunky and so well embodied for us what life should be that we must be slow to apply the words of Jesus about hating life in this world, or at least we'd have to be cautious about what exactly he could mean in that, maybe that her love for life and losing of it was in giving herself to us, that unusual gain by giving away in generosity.

On the other hand, Eileen did reach the point of saying she'd had enough of this life.

The memory loss was not how she wanted to live. Even more, in the past month as she struggled to recover from that small stroke, life was not the shape she knew or yearned for. Last week, after she'd fully realized that, death came quickly.

Yet even as she lost life, she glorified God. As hard as it is for us, there is gain in this moment, not only in recalling and celebrating the past fruitfulness of life well-lived, but more as we trust the goodness of her reunion at long last with Ingman, and even simply as we witness and are still being taught by her trust and faithfulness at the end.

We heard Psalm 42 today because I happened to read that for Eileen this past week. As I started to read, that was the last moment I saw clarity and dedication in her eyes. She stopped in some of her agitation, she focused and listened, trusting the goodness that the Psalm proclaimed. These words were her words, and by her witness are also for you:

My soul thirsts for the living God.

Why are you so full of heaviness,

O my soul,

and why are you disquieted within me?

Put your trust in God;

for I will yet give thanks

to the one who is my help and my God.