

With Thanksgiving for the Life of
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November 21, 1955 + June 4, 2017
Psalms 35:1-5 & 23; Romans 12:3-6a,9-13;
Matthew 6:26-29

For all of the hardness of your loss without Ellen, I'm at a loss for never having gotten to meet her. In spite of that, it seems I've had some good verification in hearing repeatedly a few important details. In fact, two out of the three things I first knew about Ellen seem to come up again and again, in stories, in reflections written online, in photos and the shape of this gathering today. Those two of three things are that she was good to be around and that she loved Door County.

The good to be around fits with assessments of her customer service, of the relationships she established throughout her long career with USDA, connections with meat inspectors that stretch around the country, of people who both valued and enjoyed her. That personality makes it seem pretty reasonable that she said to Shannon not too long ago that she was thinking she could be a senator. We probably could've used her there.

And, speaking of Shannon, the good to be around is also importantly a word for family, for that strong caring marriage the two of you shared and all that went with figuring out life together for almost 40 years. It's also for her parenting and grandparenting. Erik referred to his mom as his "rock," which we'll come back to in a minute with one of our Bible readings, saying he could always lean on her and she was never nosy but always open for his questions. And that she was good to be around also fits for being a daughter, and a sister, also very hard losses.

As a sister points us to Door County, a place where she could count on good time with family

gatherings, where she could find tranquility and beauty, where she could snap photos of every sunrise. Along with mountains in Colorado, the lakeshore in Door County was a place that fit for her, Ellen's own landscape.

So as we gather for this memorial service and the chance to remember Ellen, it is good and fitting that we remember her personality and relationships and care, and that we remember her delight in Door County.

I started by saying that those were two of the three things I first learned about Ellen. But for this moment, I also have to say that the very first thing I learned was that she was dying, when Jean came to tell me that Ellen was in the ICU with lots of things going wrong and she probably wasn't going to come through it alive. Besides the fact of those medical issues was also Ellen's viewpoint on illness and facing death: I've been told she probably felt ready to die, that she'd been having trouble eating for more than a year, that she was her usual stubborn Norwegian self in not wanting to go to the doctor, that she wouldn't have wanted extraordinary measures.

Some of our task gathered here is to figure out what to do with all of that, how to hold onto it, to figure what we believe it means. Today is for looking back to celebrate life, to recall the many good things with and about Ellen. And today is about putting that not just in the past but in a larger perspective. And today is also for holding the tragedies and the endings and the loss, and finding a place for that, too, in the same larger perspective.

For that perspective, we've got several Bible readings for placing Ellen's story within God's story. We have readings about delight in nature, and our relationships, and facing hardness, about the spread of life in its ups and downs, good and bad, its fullness and also the lack in its ending, in death.

From the Psalms we heard God described as walking beside the still waters with us, a verse where it's easy to picture the relaxation of the lakeshore and the calm of Door County. In the other Psalm, we heard of God not only as one to enjoy nature, but as the creator of these good places, who holds the waters and the heights of the mountains, who wants those things for our lives and is concerned for their wellbeing in the same way God is concerned for us.

That reading also used the term "rock" for God. I was intrigued that you called your mom "your rock," Erik, because it's an unusual image, both for God and for people, since it is so inanimate, so un-cuddly. But it makes sense. Calling your mother your rock and knowing God as the "rock of our salvation" is about reliability, about steadfastness, about ways that will not be swayed, like an anchor in a storm, like a warm and trustworthy place you've always been able to come home to.

I'd say it is important that what you recognized in your mom is also a characteristic of God, that the two are related. Just as we know God's goodness through our enjoyment of natural beauty and re-creation, we also know and experience God's love and care through the love and care of others. That's why we heard the reading from Romans. It could seem like a list of rules for behavior—don't think too highly of yourself, use the gifts you've been given, love genuinely, don't give in to evil, be patient. But I didn't include those as instructions, but as what Ellen seemed already to embody for you, how she lived her life. If we would describe those as godly traits, as how God wants us to relate to each other, we could say that she was living faithfully, whether she knew it or not, and whether she had to work at it or it just came naturally.

With that, we've said something about how Ellen's relationships and her love for Door

County fit into God's larger story. But what about facing the end and her death? This one is always hard. Our readings remind us and assure us that God delights in life and strives for the best life and fullness of life for us. Hardship and illness and death are not part of what God desires for us. That might makes us wonder: would God have wanted Ellen to try harder, to listen to doctors, to fight for life? And where is God in it now?

I guess I'm holding the end also with a couple of our Bible verses. Jesus reminds us that worry can't add a single hour to our life. He doesn't explain why illness or death hound us, but he does assure us that God's care and compassion and blessing are even more insistent and persistent. With that promise, there's nothing ultimately to worry about.

And, as the 23rd Psalm reminds us in concluding, there's nothing that can separate us from the love of God. Your shepherd will bring you through all the dark and deadly valleys, past what would hurt and harm you, even illnesses within your own body, and bring you to eternal life, to blessing that will never stop, never end. That's the promise we hold today for Ellen, and the fullness of your story with God, too.