

With Thanksgiving for the Life of
Ruth Eleanor Olson
March 3, 1918 + September 2, 2016
Genesis9:9-16; Psalm23; 1Corinthians13:7-10,12-13;
John10:1-6

The good shepherd and good gatekeeper has called Ruth home.

I'm typically reluctant to say that. It's a phrase that can be misused or can give a nasty image of a vengeful or capricious God, who one day decides we're fine here, but then suddenly interrupts life to whisk us off someplace else. Generally I disagree with that, and even in this specific instance we still have to confess and confront death as an interruption and sorrow; we can never say life is better without Ruth around, that it was her time to go and so now we just need to deal with God wanting her elsewhere.

Yet I should come to terms with it. After all, this isn't just a popular concept trying to explain away death. No, it's even right there in our funeral liturgy: in the prayer of the day we prayed just a couple minutes ago, we were asking God for confidence and hope to sustain us until "by your call, we are gathered to our heavenly home in the company of all your saints." So in spite of my trying to toy with and argue about the helpfulness or positive side of it, and my theological grumbling (which I hope you can hear with a playful twinkle in my eye, as well), if ever there were a time for this notion of God calling someone home, it's now and it's for Ruth.

98 years. And 98 very good years. 98 years with lots of smiles and laughter and joking, and this family's characteristic playful jibes. 98 years of strong health, and an end that came quickly and without long suffering. 98 years of productive life, whether we count that in secretarial work, or count it as weeks traveling with family each summer, or count the

fruitfulness of 98 years in being a wonderful mother, or the 30 years of marriage, or even the 47 years as a widow and in spite of that loss for how full life still was.

Certainly I'd be eager to count the 56 of those 98 years that marked Ruth's time as a charter member of this congregation, now leaving only Karen in that category. That's not just the mark of beginning- and endpoints, but the span of all that happened in this place amid those years, recalling the bigger marks of pastors who have come and gone and preached sermons for her and offered her communion. It's the myriad of hymns she sang and anthems in choir and the zillions of prayers of that long and faithful life. It's the stitches in practically countless quilts and the way that thread continues forward, from a well-tended past even in these weeks to prepare for more quilts to be shared and sent, to wrap around unknown and unimaginable bodies across this world.

And Ruth's years are marked not only by the humor and joyful conversations, but also the simple happening of relationships in this body of Christ, this communion of saints, the mutual conversation and consolation of the sisters and brothers, as Luther termed it, those very visits and unspectacular moments of interaction, gathered where Jesus himself has promised to be present in our midst. Those were surely part of Ruth's strong connections here over the years, and continued right up to the last bulletin that Mary Maxwell delivered and the last prayers that Martha Nack offered. All of this, in its most mundane and so very regular reality is exactly where God is present in our lives, where God is incarnate and continued to be embodied in Ruth, for Ruth, and for us. All of this is well worth celebrating the 98 years and this moment where she is called to the next new awareness, where we will live no longer by faith and seeing in mirrors dimly but will know it face-to-face.

But that also raises another side of this whole idea of being called home, of this good shepherd and good gatekeeper who tended to Ruth so well in her life and even now gathers her up into his arms to carry her home. It is one of the first things you were able to say about this moment, Karen, and I fully agree with you.

Jesus said, "I call my own sheep by name. They follow me because they know my voice." Well, I'm especially excited about that for Ruth. Because the first time I went to visit her was my first week here, when David Keeseberg took me to Oakwood for the introduction. Now, David has a good voice. We know his voice and his stories and his faithful words. And Ruth recognized his voice. But whatever I tried to say—maybe because of my tone or pitch or volume—she didn't recognize my voice.

On the next visit, Ruth and I talked about quite a bit. Well, I talked. But the only thing she could hear and understand was who I was. She kept repeating, with a smile and a nod, "So you're Pastor Nick."

On a subsequent visit, she was out in the dining room, and just as it's uncomfortable to try to shout at you here, I found it wasn't easy to try to make myself heard by Ruth as others were eating their lunch.

Sometimes Ruth would hear bits and other times she wouldn't understand what we were saying to her. Sometimes she would recognize, and other times voices would go unheard.

And so I celebrate this moment for Ruth and this reality of faith. I celebrate because her good shepherd has called her and she recognized his voice, this voice of Jesus who will bring her home forever. I rejoice that what was lost will be restored, both in life laid down in order to be renewed in the resurrection forever, but also the restoration from hearing loss so she can once again recognize voices and offer those jokes back to her family.

Besides this future hope, though, when you'll be reunited with Ruth, and when I'll at long last be able to have a conversation with her and not try to shout or wish we could better understand each other, besides such heavenly hope, I celebrate today that Ruth recognized the voice of Jesus and heard his call. This voice called her in baptism so very long ago, nearly a century ago. As the promise after the flood with a rainbow, an everlasting promise of blessing, for human and all creation, so the flood of baptismal waters made that call specifically to Ruth, an assurance from God no matter what. That voice continued to call even when her own ears weren't hearing well, still continuing to call her heart and spirit. That voice called throughout 98 years with the reassuring promise of care and compassion, of faith, hope, and love, a voice that would not let up through bad times or good, through gain or loss, through life or death. That voice has been always calling her to find her home in this promise, and that's the voice that will call her and eventually you with her out from death to follow into life forever. Amen