

With Thanksgiving  
for the Life of Janice Gail Kittleson Kelly  
February 23, 1932 + September 30, 2017  
Isaiah 25:6-9; Psalm 23; from Hebrews 13; Luke  
14:16-23

I need to begin this sermon by asking the obvious question: am I the only one who'd prefer to be eating banana bread right now?

I know I'm not alone in this and assume many of you got to experience and enjoy plenty of banana bread from Jan. She not only had creativity in what went into them—my fondness was for pumpkin pecan. Or maybe it was for cranberry orange. Well, it's tough to say for sure—but besides the varieties, there's the quantity. She was sure prolific! I marvel that she took the time for all that baking day after day, and the time for shopping that went along with it, and especially the time for deliveries to family and friends and the fire station and those loaves that even found their way toward me.

Something of that kindness and generosity is what I'm centrally holding onto for today.

Much more that could be said about Jan's life. Maybe most significant are her years at the Forest Products Lab. Or maybe we'd focus on the relationships she developed out of that work, including friendships that abide still long after retirement. That JBJ group (for "Jan's Birthday Junket") formed with a bang to celebrate Jan's 50<sup>th</sup> with an outing to Dolores Gust's cottage, plus stops for refreshments along the way and ever since.

But it wasn't all fun and games and happy hour. Far from it, because Jan also got a group committed to helping at WilMar center in serving monthly meals to hungry people in a way that's continued on for more than three decades and been recognized in many ways all over the city and beyond.

And that's just one notable way Jan's care and sense of charity and sharing of wellbeing extended to those around her. There were cancer walks and Art Fair on the Square and baby blankets and blood donations and on and on in ways she raised money and volunteered. And pfeffermüsse cookie dough for St. James Catholic Church, plus so much else she shared and offered to family and friends and casual acquaintances and strangers.

And, of course, the banana bread. Loaves and loaves, filling and enriching many lives, as well as (of course) many bellies. I mention that bread and hold it centrally in these days for three reasons.

The first reason is to mark that generosity. I don't do that just to compliment Jan or celebrate her good works. I believe it is important to highlight that characteristic because it is godly, because she was Christlike, acting in a way that revealed God's goodness in our lives.

Some of that is highlighted in the language of our second Bible reading, that this mutual love of our neighbors, the hospitality and kindness even to strangers, is to entertain angels unawares. And sharing what we have and doing good is a sacrifice pleasing to God.

I don't really expect that Jan did all of this so she could please God, nor even that she felt like it was much of a sacrifice. I expect it flowed from her almost naturally. And that's a little more in character and in line with how the Gospel reading portrayed the God whom we know embodied in Jesus. With abundant goodness, overflowing generosity, unconditional love. In the story from Jesus, this God is so eager to share blessing and celebration that offering goodness doesn't need to be coerced. Rather, it is receiving the goodness that is compelled in rounding up people for the banquet.

Jan, too, could have more goodness and generosity to share than we even had been prepared to receive. I continued to learn from that, not only to benefit with another loaf of tasty banana bread, but by understanding something deeper and richer about Jesus and about our God through Jan. As she gave banana bread to me, she hardly even knew me to begin with and had no reason to like me and I offered nothing in return. In that, she was embodying for me the love and care of God who continues giving and blessing and sustaining and loving, even when I don't deserve it and give nothing in return. It's a true sense of being cherished, as Jan would regularly say, "I love you. I like you, too."

Having valued that faithful reminder then points to a second reason I mention Jan's generosity and banana bread: it's a sign of missing her. Jean, her twin sister and best friend, the one who may be missing her most of all in these days, said there had been some question about having banana bread at lunch today. But she said she hadn't saved any of Jan's loaves and any other wouldn't be quite the same thing.

There's something as we go without, as we miss those deliveries and the joyful gift of a treat, as we lack that sacramental reminder of the character of Jesus, all reminding us we miss Jan. We shouldn't fail to recognize that in these days. Sometimes in small ways and sometimes enormous life-altering fractures and gaps, we are not the same as we were. Things are different without Jan. Death is wrong that way. It is not as it should be. We lament and grieve, we are sad and hurt, and we also hope.

And that leads to the third reason I'm holding onto the idea of Jan and banana bread these days, because it indicates something more. It isn't just her own generosity that reminded us of God's love. It's not only what

she gave while she was with us. It's also much more broadly that she, too, receives.

The point of the parable from Jesus wasn't just as a sign of feeding hungry people or an instruction that it's good to share. It was a word about looking ahead, about God's abundance that pulls you in from being lost and left out, that won't forget about you and won't let the celebration go on without you. This is the God who prepares a table before you, even surrounded by your enemies, to dwell in the house of the Lord forever. This is the banquet promised in Isaiah, when we'll be gathered together for a feast of rich foods, of well-aged wine, maybe of some JBJ cocktails, with unending goodness, of reunions with all those we miss and have said goodbye to and buried, with Jan, and — just maybe — with some banana bread.