

With Thanksgiving for the Life of
Jean Kittleson Oliverson
February 23, 1932 + January 18, 2021
Psalms 104 & 23; 2Cor9:6-12



The Lord loves a cheerful giver.

Typically, I avoid that verse, as it can seem back-handed guilt-tripping. Sort of a “why don’t you give me your lunch? And while you’re at it, would a smile really hurt?” Trying to prompt cheerful giving is usually less cheery and more arm twisting. The reading says it’s not about compulsion, but it sure seems compulsory, especially if the high standard is set by God.

Still, that verse *does* fit Jean. One main reminder hangs regularly in front of me: she saw I had crosses on my office wall, and now probably a third of them are crosses she cheerfully gave me, with a story behind each and connections rippling onward. I have more items on display in my office from her than from anybody else, like a heart ornament connected to her sister and little statues and the orchid that opened a bud to bloom again on the day she died.

When I went to visit her, it was always a challenge to carry on my bicycle even a portion of the things she wanted to send with me. There’s also a frog that sits in my garden and grabs the neighbor kid’s attention and sheets and sheets of stickers she’d drop off for church kids. And jewelry she was ready to share. And books or old cards. And on and on.

Plus candy. The bags of Belly Flop Jelly Bellies she’d make family send by the case to give away. The banana bread from Jan, her twin, she used to

help spread around. And Karen Kuhn, perhaps from several decades ago when she was Karen Brugge, thinking of Jean as the Gum Lady.

I don’t know, Karen and Heidi, if the song Candy Man we’ll get to in a minute is directly because of that giving candy and treats, along with the “mixing it with love,” but it sure fits what comes to mind for not a few people I’ve heard.

Jean was also generous in giving her humor and wit, and overall friendships, the inside jokes many seem to have gotten to share as a particular part of who she was for us. Sometime early on, she called me and said “Hello Nicholas.” I replied, “Hello Jean-olas.” “It’s Jean-ius,” she countered. Genius.

(A small sidenote of playing on names: Sybil was trying to figure out how to get Jean’s name into the lyrics of the song. I’m not sure if I sold her on the Candy Jean.)

Anyway, to the very end, I’m grateful for Jean’s generosity in relationship. I’ve noted that she had a list of people to call and check in on in these months of the pandemic. At first, when that weekly call came I was grateful she had a way to keep herself connected and not be too isolated. But I came to realize she wasn’t doing it just because *she* needed somebody to talk to; she was doing it to care for me. And I’m grateful, and I’m definitely at a loss without her.

That loss isn’t easy.

The first Psalm we heard almost glosses over the pain of deaths. It moves quickly to “you send forth your Spirit and they are created, and so you renew the face of the ground,” almost leaping past the hard taking “away their breath, they die and return to dust.” Maybe it’s the vantage of eons: the generations rise and fall, old ones wither away and the new arrive to take their place.

But on Ash Wednesday, which was this week, that returning to dust is more personal. With ash marked on foreheads, the words are spoken “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” As I repeat that, I watch those who are getting older and facing health challenges and who may not bring their forehead to be marked the next year. When marking children (and, this year, since it was remain-in-your-vehicle pandemic

precautions, also saying the words to a couple dogs), the youthful vitality seems so fleeting in the face of mortality. There's been such a constant reminder of death in this difficult year, so much life restricted and taken, many ways that it's inescapable and we'll return to dust.

Still, the Psalm's line about taking away breath resonated especially for me with Jean, on oxygen, pausing for deep gasps to catch her breath, having to watch that it wasn't too cold or too humid to go outside. I would've liked for her to be given more breath, particularly in the hospital at the end.

Breath being taken away also hit home for all the death that Jean had had to go through. She'd had many goodbyes. Too many I know a small part, of siblings whose funerals I've been part of, and a daughter, and a son-in-law. There have been friends from church, including a second person she claimed as a twin sister, the other Jean, Jean Loichinger. That's just in recent times.

It's a lot of death, a lot of loss, of grief. It would seem like too much to me. And now compounded as we are without her.

Jean always surprised—or maybe confounded—me in confronting all that death. It would strike me as tragically sad, but she would plug along, ready to crack jokes, still cheerful. She did say it took her a while to adapt after Jan died.

But that not crying always made me wonder: was Jean just so cheery that even the tragedy couldn't get her down? Was she ignoring or skipping past the loss when she said she didn't need to cry? Occasionally she'd say something different—referencing a family member's death when she was in high school, if I recall—that she didn't want to start crying because she thought she'd never be able to stop.

I guess I mention that for us today because Jean could help convey God to us. God is the cheerfulness of givers, abundantly, freely, with every breath, across the span of your life and across this wide world, every good thing, food and drink, all good works, each other, just plain everything. Constantly. In her own lavish perpetual generosity and care and attention, Jean gave us a glimpse of God the giver, the benevolent providence, the one

who always wants to provide and sustain us with good.

But maybe even when Jean had limits of her cheer, and worries she couldn't overcome, and when her breath finally departed, in just such a moment as this, we see through her all the more confidently the promise of this God who doesn't just watch generations roll by carelessly, but sends a new and right Spirit, raising life from dust and ashes with the breath of resurrection, the promise of an eternal banquet table set, where we will be brought again together and every tear will be dried and mourning and crying and pain will be no more and death will be no more.

“Who can take tomorrow? Dip it in a dream, Separate the sorrow and collect up all the cream?” Maybe not the Candy Man. And maybe when even the Candy Jean can't, maybe the CandyGod? The JesusMan? 'Cuz he mixes it with love.