

In Memoriam for Connie Parvey
Sermon Preached at University Lutheran Church
Cambridge, Massachusetts
By Rev. John S. Kidd
June 28, 2011

Readings: Psalm 118: 21-29 and Matthew 11: 1-11

Not far from here, Emily Dickinson wrote...

*Should mortal lip express
The undeveloped freight
Of a delivered syllable
T'would crumble 'neath the weight.*

Join me in hoping and praying that we not crumble 'neath the weight of the words and syllables we share today. But rather that we be filled with the gift of life, that we might live and live abundantly. Amen.

A reminder from Connie: "This is the day the Lord has made... Rejoice and be glad in it!"

My life has been populated by moments in which Connie has reminded me of this.

One Saturday night in the spring of 2005, our trusted friend, John Hammock, called to alert us that if we wanted to see Connie before she died we had better come to Cambridge immediately.

I was preaching Sunday morning in Fairfield Connecticut. Kate and I agreed we would skip the after-service social hour to hit the road and drive to Mount Auburn Hospital as quickly as a Lutheran in good conscience can.

In the hospital lobby Don Larsen, who had just visited Connie, recognized us. After greetings, he alerted us that our visit might be very short. She was not alert or responsive and her condition was not at all promising.

Forewarned, we rode the elevator to her floor and entered her room. I was at the foot of her bed when Kate leaned over to her ear saying, "Connie... It's Kate and John." Her eyes cracked open and smiled. Then, looking at me with eyes opened wide, "Oh John", she said, "What are the readings for today?" And that began an hour-long discussion of the Bible texts, how I had approached them and the alternate routes that might have been taken.

After an hour or so, the conversation shifted, as our conversations often did, to the discipline of gratitude and the gifts with which life and God have blessed us. As you know, patience was never one of Connie's great virtues. Her prolonged hospital stay had challenged her tolerance for her caregivers. But she said that she was working on a spiritual discipline that would enable her to "Expect nothing. Accept everything. And forgive everyone... especially yourself."

Even in her hospital room, Connie had an extraordinary capacity for living in the present.

I got the call about Connie's death while driving on the New Jersey Turnpike. The Jersey Turnpike is a good place to receive this kind of a call. There really is not very much there to either attract or distract. So my heart and mind wrapped me in thoughts and feelings of the moment.

If you ever received Connie's catechetical instruction on eating chocolate you know the depth of her appreciation for the moment. According to Connie, to truly appreciate chocolate one begins with a piece of excellent chocolate. It was to be at least 80% to 85% cocoa. She demonstrated the proper way to cut a small piece from the bar, grind some pepper onto it, and place it on the tip of the tongue where, with front teeth only, one was to chew it at least 25 times before swallowing. Since 1997 when I lived with her for a semester while a Merrill Fellow at the Divinity School, Connie had campaigned to get me to eat more slowly by chewing every bite of every thing at least twenty five times. She failed to change my eating habits. But she knew how to dwell in a chocolate moment.

About a month before she died I called her one morning. She told me she was out for a walk with such joy that I might have thought she was on an Alpine walk near Geneva, climbing Smugglers Notch or Mount Mansfield in Vermont, or simply walking around her beloved Fresh Pond here in Cambridge. But her joy came from walking back and forth in the sun on the twenty-five or so feet of concrete in front of Cambridge Home. She was as alive to that moment as anyone, anywhere could be.

She stunned me one evening. She was in the process of learning and adapting to the feeding tube that had reduced her free and active day to about six hours. The transition was neither easy nor rewarding for her. But as she talked about it she told me that at this stage of her life this was her calling... that calling was to live as fully as she could in the brief hours she had been given.

Connie was not confined to the present, however. She was called to be a minister of Chris, a pastor. Over the years, the Gospel story of Christ's entry into Jerusalem that we heard a few minutes ago surfaced and resurfaced in our conversations. Read at her ordination, she liked to remind me that the preacher, Krister Stendahl, proclaimed that Connie's role in the story was that of the donkey - that this would be her calling.

In Matthew, Jesus sends two disciples into Jerusalem to untie and bring to him a donkey with a colt that they would find tethered together. If any one asks what they are doing they are to say that the Lord has need of them and bring them to Jesus. Once they are delivered, the disciples throw their robes over them, Jesus climbs on them and rides them into the city where people see him coming and throw their robes along with palm branches on the road before him. They shout Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

I like to think that Krister was referring to this story as told in the Gospel of Matthew. In Mark and Luke, however, Jesus sends the disciples to fetch a young colt that had never been ridden before. These versions do not fit Connie so well. Connie was ordained in midlife, not as a young, never ridden colt. More importantly, I cannot imagine Connie carrying Jesus by herself. She was always tethered to someone... or busily tying one someone to yet

someone else. She had the gift of meeting people and almost immediately trying to connect them to someone else and weaving them into a network, a fabric of relationships.

I suspect that all of us here have experienced Connie doing this. “Oh Marylyn, I have met a fascinating person who is working on something related to what you are doing. You have to meet....”

She did this in campus ministry. She loved the Lutheran Student Movement. She cultivated the connections between Harvard, MIT, the Fenway and UniLu. But most of all, she sought to encourage personal links from one student to another that would grow into the bonds of friendships. She created green tables where students could eat, meet, talk and grow together.

Her global networking started after college when she worked with World War II’s displaced persons in Germany, a harbinger to her interest in Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, whose current and past presidents she embraced through her campus ministry work here at UniLu. Engaging the world, she went from UniLu to the World Council of Churches as a champion for strengthening the positions and roles of women in the church. Teaching at the Lutheran Seminary in Vancouver, Canada, she once again bound the globe and the campus together. She loved to cultivate her ties to international students and colleagues.

Her commitment to women was pioneering. As one of the first women to be ordained in the Lutheran Church she opened doors through which women of faith could more easily pass. Seeking out women of faith, she was not simply a role model but a seasoned compatriot. Connie was constantly contacting and connecting with other women and offering encouragement, support and insight. The language we use in today’s liturgy reminds us how she fought to incorporate language in worship that empowers women to see and position themselves as God sees and desires them, and enables men to do the same.

And through the decades her hub was here in Cambridge and UniLu. Coming to church she wanted to arrive early. There were people she wanted to see and she knew there would be people wanting to see her. So she strategically stationed herself in the narthex – to see and be seen – and to make sure that visitors would be welcomed. This is also where she came when she needed help and Connie was always very specific about the help she wanted. Tasks were very specifically defined in terms of what she needed done, and in the way she wanted it done. When I agreed to move a box for Connie, her supervision was very specific. “When you lift it turn it to the right. No, not the left. And when you put it down, I want that side facing forward, and please move it a half inch to the left.” And when a task, large or small, was completed, her effusive gratitude was genuine. Connie embodied the twofold meaning of grace – the simultaneous receiving of a gift and expression of thanksgiving – in building relationships with and among us.

God needed a Connie to carry grace into our world, and we did too.

Connie ministered to the world as the Gospel donkey to whom each of us became tethered. One at a time she embraced us and found the knots that would weave us together. The

tethers with which she wove us into relationship's fabric became the robes of discipleship. According to Matthew's Gospel, these robes of discipleship cover us. And Jesus sits and rides on us. This is hard to envision - Jesus riding on both the donkey and the colt. When I Googled the image I found that with only one or two exceptions, artists depict only the donkey. How can anyone ride a donkey and a colt at the same time?

But when Connie latched onto us, it happened. We became enveloped in the robes of discipleship. We found Jesus sitting upon us. And we learned to walk together, side by side.

When the people encounter Jesus riding the donkey and her colts, their response comes naturally - "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the Name of the Lord. Hosanna!"

We are blessed by such glorious moments. And today, we dwell in them.

In our family we have the habit of finishing our telephone conversations with the words "I love you". In our minds and hearts, Connie came to be family. So some years ago we began ending our phone calls by saying "I love you Connie." At first Connie seemed surprised and unsure of what to say. I suspected that the hours of her days were heavily tilted into the world of ideas and their articulation and away from feelings and the words that express them. It took about three calls before she began to respond. And then I could hear the smile in her voice as she said, "I love you too". I count it a blessing that the last words I said to her were "I love you" and that her last words to me were "I love you too". In these words the Psalmist call resounds, "Give thanks to the Lord for she is good, and her love endures for ever.

Connie and I shared an interest in icons. At Augustana, each Sunday we print an icon in the bulletin. I shared and often discussed them with Connie. Having an expansive idea of what qualifies as an icon, for the Sundays after Easter I selected a series from the work of Stanley Spencer. In Cookham England, Spencer painted the interior the village chapel with images drawn from the First and Second World Wars. Among them is a series of "Resurrection" panels. Connie died on Saturday night and the following morning the icon was entitled "Awakening". It depicts women in a cemetery climbing out of their graves with children crawling nearby.

The central figure is a woman, sitting upright on the edge of her grave. Healthy amounts of flesh are on her bones. There are no signs of osteoporosis. There is no feeding tube. Her arms are up in an early-morning, waking-up kind of stretch.

And I hear Connie's voice saying, "This is the Day that the Lord has made. Rejoice and be glad in it."



John Kidd is the Pastor of Augustana Lutheran Church in Washington DC. As a student at Harvard Divinity School in the 1970's, Connie supervised his fieldwork as a Vicar for Campus Ministry at UniLu. Connie presided at his marriage to Katherine Mancke Kidd and was his sponsor for ordination. Their relationship grew through the years as they vacationed together in Vermont, spent time together in Cambridge, and shared life's passages together.