



A Room Full of Friends: Kathleen Norris
 Rev. Dr. Glenda Hollingshead; June 29, 2025
 3rd Sunday after Pentecost
 Psalm 133; Ephesians 2:11-22

In our continuing sermon series—A Room Full of Friends—writers who have become treasured companions and who have taken up residence on my bookshelves—this morning we will look at another Presbyterian author: Kathleen Norris. Norris, a best-selling writer, was born in Washington, D.C. in 1947. She later moved with her parents to Hawaii and then returned to the east coast to complete her studies at Bennington College in Vermont. She became arts administrator of the Academy of American Poets and published her first book of poetry two years later. Then in 1974 she inherited her grandparents' farm in Lemmon, South Dakota and moved there with her husband, David.

As she embraced the spirituality of the Great Plains, she returned to her Presbyterian roots. There she was—a married woman with a Protestant background—trying to get her feet under her again. More often than not, she found herself filled with doubt instead of faith. In the midst of her doubt, though, she was drawn to the ancient practice of monasticism, to a community whose days are centered on a rigid schedule of prayer, work, and scripture. She says no one could have been more surprised than she was when she ended up with two extended residencies at St. John's

Abbey in Minnesota. As both an insider and an outsider, she became immersed in a world of liturgy, ritual, and a deep sense of community.

When Norris was a child, she loved to sing in church choirs and she really enjoyed church—though she cared little for the theology—didn't think much about it, really. Then when she went to college she drifted away, taking on Literature as a substitute for religion. But years later, she felt an urge to return to church—to try to rediscover the religion of her youth. What she found when she got there, however, was a far cry from what she remembered. It seemed in her absence, society had corrupted the Christian community by its emphasis on polarizing. Insulting other people had become a form of argument. It didn't matter what the issue was. It seemed like the stand a person took on particular issues was more important than baptism, the Lord's Prayer, or the Apostles Creed. Somehow Christians had become more interested in their opinions on political matters than on other things. Of course, there are plenty of areas where folks differ—in practice, theology—all sorts of things—Norris recognized this full well. But surely the Christian community is healthier when the focus is on what unites brothers and sisters of the faith—rather than what divides them.

Even if the church wasn't the place Norris recalled, still it became the very thing she needed most at this time in her life.

In the church and in the monastic community, Norris learned to live with her doubts. In fact, she learned that God takes pleasure in working with someone like her who had doubts—whether they were about herself, about her husband's mental illness and alcoholism, about her role in the world...

Reflecting on the grace of finding two faith communities to feed her soul, Norris explains: “For a couple of years I really struggled with what I should be doing with my life. And the monks would say, ‘Well, you sit with us in the choir, you sing the songs, this is where you should be, this is what you should be doing. Let's see what happens.’ It was not a conversion: Here's a list of things to believe and do. It was: ‘Keep showing up. Something good will come of this.’ Also, going to church. This has meaning. This is above and beyond my experience. Eventually I could see that all these things had more weight than my doubts and my frustrations.”

In her book, *The Cloister Walk*, in a chapter entitled “Small Town Sunday Morning,” Norris describes the beauty and blessing of the community she found in a little Presbyterian Church. I invite you to hear her words:

At the worship services of Hope and Spencer there's a time after the sermon, and before the Lord's Prayer, in which people are asked to speak of any particular joys they wish to share with the congregation, or concerns they want us to address in our communal prayer on that Sunday, and also to pray over during the week. It's an invaluable part of

our worship, a chance to discover things you didn't know: that the young woman sitting in the pew in front of you is desperately worried about her gravely ill brother in Oregon, that the widower in his eighties sitting across the aisle is overjoyed at the birth of his first great-grand-child.

All of this pleases the gossips; I've been told that on Sunday afternoons the phone lines in town are hot with news that's been picked up in church. For the most part, it's a good kind of gossip, its main effect being to widen the prayer circle. It's useful news as well; I'm one of the many who make notes on my church bulletin; so-and-so's in the hospital; send a card, plan a visit. Our worship sometimes goes into a kind of suspended animation, as people speak in great detail about the medical condition of their friends or relatives. We wince; we squirm; we sigh; and it's good for us. Moments like this are when the congregation is reminded of something that all pastors know; that listening is often the major part of ministry, that people in crisis need to tell their story, from beginning to end, and the best thing—often the only thing—that you can do is to sit there and take it in. And we do that pretty well. I sometimes feel that these moments are the heart of our worship. What I think of as the vertical dimension of Presbyterian worship—the hymns in exalted language that bolster our faith, the Bible readings, the sermon that may help us through the week—finds a strong (and necessary) complement in the localized, horizontal dimension of these simple statements of “joys and concerns.”

For many years this aspect of our worship has also been strongly ecumenical. If your neighbor who's a Catholic, or a member of the Church of God, had a heart attack the day before and was flown to Bismarck in the air ambulance, you ask for people's prayers for him and his family. Our prayers also extend to those who seldom darken a church door. Not long ago, the congregation learned from one of his longtime friends that Bill O'Rourke had died. (Wild Bill to his friends, from way back in his drinking days.) Most of us knew that he'd been failing in the Veterans Hospital for some time. I knew him casually, but still missed him. An old-time cowboy—he broke horses for the U.S. Cavalry between the world wars—he was permanently bow-legged. In retirement he'd become a fixture at the café on Main Street; you could nearly always find him there holding court. More rarely, I'd run into him outside. Bill would wait for someone to come by who would stop and admire one of the Ford pickup trucks from the early 1950s that he kept polished and in running condition. When his death was announced, a sigh ran through the congregation. All but the youngest members, and our pastor, had known him for years, and had their own Bill stories.

It was an odd moment. Bill's death felt like a loss, to me, to many people, but we also knew that our young minister would know nothing of him. The pastor was about to begin the intercessory prayer that follows this part of worship, when one of Bill's oldest friends

couldn't resist saying, "You know, Bill paid me the first fifty cents I ever made, back in 1930." The minister smiled, but looked a bit nonplussed. He took a breath, as if to start the prayer. From a pew in the back of the church came a voice, "And I'll bet you still have it."

Of course we laughed for a good long time, before continuing with our worship; it was the kind of story Bill would have enjoyed. He didn't care much for church decorum, but he took some aspects of religion seriously enough. The last time I saw him was at the Lutheran church, where he'd come for the funeral of an old friend. Bill sat alone at the back of the church. "I wanted to make sure they gave him a good sendoff," is all he said to me, after the service. He was apparently satisfied.

When the minister finally got to say his "Let us pray," we were ready. We had been praying, all along. We had been being ourselves before God.

"We had been being ourselves before God." Learning to "be ourselves before God"—well, to me, that's what a faith community is all about. Learning to accept ourselves and one another—lifting one another up—celebrating with one another—holding each other's stories. As a body of believers, we come together on any given Lord's Day to worship—raising our hearts, and minds, and souls to God—in thanksgiving, in praise, in wonder. At the baptismal font, life-giving water marks us as God's own—uniting us to every believer of every place and time. No more barriers of race, gender, status, or age. No more barriers of nationality, history, and practice to overcome. Around the Table of our Lord, we gather and we are nourished by the promises of our Lord. Truly we are blessed for we are a community—a faith community that has been doing this work for a long, long time. Day by day, here we learn how to be ourselves before God—maybe, maybe—even our best selves. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Cover Photo by John Zirkle