

Funeral Homily
Rev. Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
July 26, 2019

Carol Suzanne Phillippe
January 15, 1932 – July 16, 2019

John 14: 1-6, 25-27
John 17: 1-6

Probably the hardest thing about life is death. Our head tells us that we will not live forever, but our heart has a hard time accepting that. It is hard to wake up one day and come to realize that the world is not the same as it was the day before. The friend you relied on to tell you what you needed to hear will no longer share in those conversations. The parent who taught you about life through their love will no longer be present. The spouse who walked beside you through thick and thin, for better or worse, will no longer be there for the journey. The world is not the same today as it was yesterday.

That is death's reality. It is a shock to our system, because as human beings, we are relational. Our identity is formed by the people who are a part of our life: family, friends, classmates, coworkers, and so on. What shocks us about death is that key person, who we related to in significant and meaningful ways, is now gone. Just as our identity is formed through relationships, death alters our personal identity due to the absence of that relationship.

The challenge of the Christian faith is to trust in something we cannot see, cannot touch, and cannot hear. The challenge – and crux – of the Christian faith is to believe that death does not, in fact, have the final word. As you will see at the top of your bulletin today, in the Presbyterian Church we call a funeral service “a service of witness to the resurrection.” We live our lives of faith as witnesses to the one who conquered death so that we all might have eternal life. Death may alter our identity, but our faith in the resurrection grounds our being in the One who created us, who redeems us, and who sustains us.

In our gathering together here today, we are bearing witness. We are bearing witness to God's grace and presence in the life of Suzanne Phillippe, one of God's children, who touched each of us and so many others in immeasurable ways. But we are also bearing witness to the fact that we trust and believe that God will be with us in all times of life, even in times of anxiety, stress, and uncertainty.

The last time I saw Suzanne was two days before she died. It was a brief visit with Becki by her side, and we knew she was near the end of her journey on this earth. After we said a prayer together, I said to her

what I often say to folks when I leave: “I’ll see you soon.” That may have seemed insensitive for me to say, especially as she was approaching the end of her earthly life.

But perhaps in saying that I am speaking the faith that Jesus shares with his disciples the night before he died. In John’s Gospel, as Jesus spoke to his disciples, he knew they were worried, scared, and uncertain about what the future held if he was not going to be with them. To ease their anxiety, Jesus assures them there is a place waiting for them in his father’s kingdom. “In my Father’s house, there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? I will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.” That is a great assurance to me, and I hope it is for you, as well. For in our faith in the resurrection, life does not end with the diseases we suffer from, the pain we endure, or the heartbreak we experience. Instead, eternal life is promised by the one who is “the way and the truth and the life.”

If there was one thing which weighed heavily on Suzanne during these last several months, it was how much she missed her siblings and other family who had preceded her in death. What brings me great joy this day – and I hope it brings you great joy, as well – is because of her faith and our faith in the resurrection, Suzanne is reunited this day with all her loved ones in the many dwelling places which our Lord has provided for her and for us.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said: “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house” (Matthew 5:14-15). The light which Jesus spoke of is something we are born with, something we are blessed with, something which identifies us as God’s children. That light exists in each of us, and as Jesus says, is not to be hidden, but is to “shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (5:16).

We are all here today because God’s light shined on us through Suzanne Phillippe. Suzanne’s faith was shaped through her lifetime of service to the Presbyterian Church, from her baptism in Washington, Indiana; her childhood and young adult years in Washington Presbyterian Church; to her moving to Indianapolis and, after marrying Gordon, becoming a charter member of John Knox Presbyterian Church in 1962. God’s light shined on so many here through her active participation in so many activities, as well as her welcoming smile and warm embrace when you met her on a Sunday. I cannot tell you how much it meant to me to receive one of Suzanne’s hugs as I greeted her after worship!

The word that also came to mind when I thought of Suzanne was “matriarch.” She was the center of this family’s life, and she loved each

of them so dearly, just as they loved her. Becki said that her mother was happiest when she was holding a baby – and she had many babies to hold in her family! But I also appreciated what her grandson, Kris, said about Suzanne: “I’m sure others will say the same, Grandma was the center piece for our family. The whole family loved her and I believe we all circled back to her. She kept us updated on all that was going on, even with our relatives around the world. She had a fascination with our family lineage, that a lot of the family takes pride in as well. It will be hard going forward without her.” God’s light shined on all in this family through Suzanne’s love and care.

One of the scriptures Suzanne listed that she wanted included at her funeral was John 17. In this passage, Jesus is speaking before his arrest the night before he dies, and in these words, I almost feel as if Suzanne is speaking to us. “Father, the hour has come . . . This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in our own presence . . . I have made you name known to those whom you gave me from the world.” God’s light shined on others through the good work that Suzanne completed in her earthly life, and now she receives the rich reward of her promised eternal life through Jesus Christ our risen Lord.

We are each given a light that shines in us. That light can either be kept to ourselves, or shared with the world. There is no doubt what Suzanne chose to do with the light that God had given to her. Now, the question becomes: what will you do with the light God has shined on you through Suzanne? My prayer is that we may find it in ourselves to share that light of love. Because you never know how your light will illumine someone else’s dark path, as surely Suzanne illumined each of our paths.

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives, and we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” Amen.