

The Gift of Love: The Face of God

Funeral Service for Louise Zevalkink

*Exodus 33:17-23; I John 4:7-8, 12, 16;
Psalm 16:5-11; John 1: 1-5, 14, 18; John 14: 8-9*

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Finally home; she is finally home and what shall we say? My words are not adequate to paint a portrait of this extraordinary human being. With you all, I loved her deeply. I have some sense of the void in your hearts. In these later years she really did not want to go out and about nor did she want dear friends in. In a sense she has long been removed from family gatherings and celebrations. Nonetheless she was present in her absence and was still “there.” She, the solid rock, the heart and center of the family, was still with you. But now she is gone. Slowly but surely she was shutting down in those last weeks and final days. Today we gather to worship, to remember and to give thanks for this beautiful life lived out before us. Leading the service as I am, yet I do so as one of you, as family. I can do no other.

It would take too long and is not necessary to relate why that is the case – but you know. And so for a few moments let us celebrate her life as the child of God that she was.

Louise was deeply traditional in the Christian faith, in the Reformed faith that looked back to Geneva, to John Calvin, and was expressed perhaps most clearly and warmly in *The Heidelberg Catechism* which opens with the penetrating question, “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” To which the eloquent answer is given,

“That I with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ....”

She never wavered from that bedrock trust in the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ. To her end, one of her favorite hymns was “Blessed Assurance.”

“Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!
O what a foretaste of glory divine!”

So secure was she in her Christian faith that she had the freedom to question, to wonder. I suspect that is why we grew so close over the years. Spending the

summers on Lake Michigan shores in Grand Haven, the Zevalkink clan found their way to Spring Lake and Christ Community Church. I really don't know just when that began or what brought you there in the first place, but I remember as summer arrived, year after year, I looked forward to having you fill a pew on my right about two-thirds back.

And every so often I raised a question about which I was thinking and invited the people to think with me. Those were days of probing, not of dogmatic statement. And Louise was a natural prober; she loved to think, to wonder, to deepen and broaden her faith and understanding. Sometimes I got a bit too far ahead in the questioning of orthodox Reformed doctrine. Then there would be a conversation at the door – never in panic, certainly never in anger; she never took offense, she had to think about it. She was really quite wonderful: thoroughly engaged, thinking deeply, seeing possible pitfalls but ever gracious, kind and patient.

If I were to describe my own pilgrimage and, I think, hers, there was a movement from dogmatic clarity and rational certainty to deep trust in the good and gracious God who holds us securely as we wonder, as we attempt to bring faith understanding into meaningful relationship with growing experience in our evolving human situation. There was a little choral response I haven't thought of for years, but thinking of Louise I think it describes the passion of her life:

To see Thee more clearly,
To follow Thee more nearly,
To love Thee more dearly.

Perhaps that gives you a snapshot of how I knew Louise and I suspect you will recognize her in my description.

I read the passage from Exodus. These are Israel's founding stories – a kernel of history with faith's embroidering. Moses, Israel's great leader, brings them to Sinai where God calls him to the mountain and gives him not only the Ten Commandments but extensive direction for Israel's life and worship. The people grow restive when Moses does not come down to them. They go to Aaron and, in an attempt to calm them, he calls for their gold and jewels and from those casts a Golden Calf – the focus for worship.

The story is familiar. Moses returns, is infuriated at the people's faithlessness and smashes the tables of the Law – fearing God may consume them in His anger.

Well, that is the background for Chapter 33. God and Moses in conversation, Moses pleading with God not to abandon Israel but to go with them – and God promises to accompany them on the way of their pilgrimage. I selected this Old Testament story because, as God is reconciled to Israel, Moses makes a request:

“Show me Your glory.”

And God's answer –

“You cannot see my face; for no one shall see my face and live.”

God does, however, instruct Moses to stand in a cleft in the rock as God passes by. God will cover him with His hand until He has passed by so Moses can see God's back, but the chapter ends with the words “My face shall not be seen.”

This biblical story came to me when I heard the news that Louise was shutting down and I began to think about her and her religious pilgrimage. There was in Moses, the story tells us, a longing to see God which I take to mean a longing to know God, to experience God in all His glory and greatness and grace.

I can identify with that. I know that is not a common human experience; multitudes, I suspect, go on their way happily or nonchalantly, not worrying much about the source, ground, and goal of the whole cosmic drama. But I do and Louise did. And, as the Hebrew people told their founding story, they were saying from the beginning there has been a hunger for God.

But this story ends “My face shall not be seen.” And that brings me to the heart of my reflection. I knew a week before Louise died that my meditation would be “The Gift of Love: The Face of God.” In that title I am trying to say she was a gift of love and she gifted us with love. In Louise, love was embodied and she was our gift of Love. But that's not all; in her face we saw the face of God.

In the Gospel of John and the First Epistle of John there is a fascinating thread that essentially says, “No one has ever seen God” but God is love and those who love abide in God and God in them.

“In the beginning was the Word....” (John 1:1);

“The Word was made flesh (or human) and lived among us, and we have seen His glory...” (John 1:14);

“No one has ever seen God. It is God the only son...who has made Him known.”(John 1:18).

In the ancient story God's word to Moses is “You cannot see my face...you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.” But the Christmas gospel is “The Word became flesh...and we have seen His glory.” The gospel writer is well aware that “No one has ever seen God” but now the clue to the mystery of God is a human face.

If we move to John 14: 8-9, that this is the writer's intention is clear. Philip says to Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Jesus' response is amazing:

"Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father."

Quite amazing, isn't it! Just as the Moses stories were created by later generations trying to grasp their origins in Moses' encounter with God, so the circle of the Apostle John, probably located in Ephesus, was trying to understand the story of Jesus, his life, death and continuing presence in their midst. What was the message, the truth that came to expression in the life of Jesus? The Gospel is the Good News – in Jesus we have experienced the presence of God; in Jesus we have a clue to the Sacred Mystery from which all has emerged.

The writer of the First Letter of John takes us one giant step further. Reading the mystery of God in the life of Jesus he states his fundamental trust. He writes, "God is love." The Gospel affirms that the mystery of God is revealed in the humanity of Jesus. The writer of the First Letter of John repeats the Gospel's acknowledgment that no one has ever seen God but, rather than pointing exclusively to the Word made flesh, this writer makes the astounding claim, broadening the Gospel's claim. He writes,

"If we love one another, God lives in us, and His love is perfected in us....God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them."

Do you understand my title? Do you see why for the funeral meditation for Louise Zevalkink I entitled it "The Gift of Love; The Face of God"? She was the gift to everyone whose life she touched from the intimacy of marriage and family to the wide circle of friends and community – the gift of love – and in her face we glimpsed the face of God.

Over these past years Betsy and Peg conspired with me to visit Louise but she was cagey and usually foiled our conspiring. But on March 23 of this year it was arranged. I gained entrance as it were and we had a delightful time. In fact it was so natural and easy that Peg called Betsy to come in with Nancy. We had one more happy hour.

I had brought along a copy of a rather new hymn, "I was There to Hear Your Borning Cry." We even tried to sing it. I chose that hymn because of the final verse:

When the evening gently closes in
And you shut your weary eyes
I'll be there as I have always been

With just one more surprise.

Well it was a beautiful moment.

And then when it was apparent that Louise was approaching her end I came once more. She had been unresponsive all day but Peg and Betsy were sitting on her bed, Kleenex at the ready. Once again she came to life and was very present with us. She smiled and savored those moments as we sang and prayed.

Finally the end drew near but once again with Peg and Betsy present she tried to tell them something – they figured out there was a framed something above her desk. It was a framed prayer I offered at their 50th wedding anniversary celebration. I had the prayer written in calligraphy and she had framed it. The girls read it to her and she said, “Now you may go.”

The prayer in part tells the story of this wonderful woman, so full of grace, and the life she shared with her beloved Jim, taken from her too soon:

“We give Thee thanks for the love and faithfulness in which they have lived together, worked together, nurtured their family, and been stewards together of the grace of life.

*We all in various ways are here present to attest to the enrichment our lives have received through them and the model they provide for us,
- a model of the joy of living,
- of quiet strength and steadiness,
- of vivacity and graciousness,
- of faith and devotion,
- of kindness and gentleness,
- of faithfulness and love.”*

Louise has entered light eternal, united again with the man she loved, caught up in the abyss of love of the God we have glimpsed in her beautiful face.

What a gift!
What grace!

Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!