

Love, the Bridge between Now and Then

A Service of Worship in Celebration of the Life of
Mary June Packer,
June 11, 1933 – January 5, 2015

Text: I Corinthians 13: 4-13, I John 4: 7-8, 12, 16

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The Lee Chapel, Sytsema Funeral Homes,
Norton Shores, Michigan

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I have expressed to Bob and the family my deep sadness and shock at June's sudden passing. I have been with them before in a time of tragic loss, felt bonded to them walking through the death of Mark less than thirteen months ago – and now, with no time to prepare to the extent that is possible – June's death.

From the moment I learned of her death I began to think of this moment, which is always the case with me. How can I bring her life to expression in the context of our Christian faith in which she was deeply nurtured?

There was a time, perhaps two decades ago, when the Packers began to make a pilgrimage to Spring Lake on Sundays. That was quite a dynamic period for us at Christ Community Church. Without going into that whole experience, I suspect Bob and June were attracted by the ambience of grace and love that marked our community. There were open hearts and open arms to embrace any and all who longed for the smile of God's favor as it came to expression in our midst.

I may or may not be totally correct in my surmise, but what causes me to think thus is the person I came to know as June. She had a grace about her. She loved easily, deeply, broadly and, of course, Bob her willing accomplice. That is the context out of which my meditation arises as we celebrate her life.

Love, the Bridge between Now and Then

In the decade of my retirement I have continued to wrestle with the God Question, our whence and whither and the meaning of our being in the meantime. As I grow older, I suppose I grow more open to life's deep questions – the ultimate questions.

A few weeks ago one of Grand Rapids' fine churches invited me to lead a discussion on heaven in an adult forum. I was to be the third of three guests. As

the time drew near I received an email that told me how the session was being announced:

The Rev. Richard A. Rhem will facilitate a discussion on faith, life, heaven and human experience. We will talk about classical interpretations of Scripture, the progressive perspective, and whatever else comes to mind.

Well, needless to say, I knew that was way beyond my capacity. But, since the initial invitation mentioned heaven, following the first two presentations on books recording near death experiences, I focused on heaven or, more accurately – Is this all there is or is there more to come?

Of course, no one knows; this is not a mystery that human rationality can solve with more intense research. Finally it is a matter of trust – fundamental trust – and, being within the Christian tradition, we hear the biblical witness. The more I ponder our human existence before the face of the ultimate Mystery, the more I am convinced that Love is the Source, Ground and Goal of Being and, thus, of our being.

In the Scripture I read from I John 4, we have the claim that God is Love. This is a fascinating paragraph for, after that statement, the writer goes on to acknowledge that no one has ever seen God but, he continues,

If we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

And later he declares,

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

This is a profound insight into Ultimate Being and our sharing in that ultimate reality to the extent that we love and are loved.

Such human love is described nowhere more fully than in St. Paul's Hymn of Love in I Corinthians 13. Verses 4 to 7 are a portrait of one who loves and, frankly, I suspect you will, with me, see in that description a portrait of June.

But it is the next paragraph to which I would point for there we see referenced the fact that human being is immersed in mystery we cannot dissolve. Without explaining the context to which St. Paul addresses his claim, I would only say he acknowledges that in our present existence we live with questions and a dull and dim view of life's mystery.

...now we see in a mirror dimly.

Questions plague us – all the whys, all the seemingly senseless suffering and tragedy. But that is not the last word – to the “now” there is a “then.”

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

Love never ends. Loving here we gain a glimpse of something more. Losing those we love, we have a deep assurance that they have moved from love's "now" to love's "then," lost in wonder, love and praise.

I offer this hope and comfort to you, not because the Bible says so, but out of an ever-deepening experience, a human experience – of love *now* which the fundamental trust of my life assures me of love *then* – the perfection, completion, fullness of our deepest loves and fondest hopes. Our loves *now* are yet beset by pain, loss, deep grief. There is no denial of that – only the denial that that is the last word.

Love is *now* saturated with tears;
Love is *then* in fullness in the Sacred Presence who is Love.

Now, Love – heaven's foretaste;
Then, Love – heaven's fullness.

With us, June knew the *now*; before us, she knows the *then*, which for her is the *Eternal Now*.

Could we say,

Heaven is here;
Heaven is now;
and the best is yet to be!

Let us pray.

O God, we would be still
and know that You are God – Source of all being,
Mysterious Mover of the ongoing cosmic drama,
creatively breathing fresh surprises
into the tapestry of our history,
graciously present to us in those moments of awareness
when we come to ourselves,
when for at least a brief time,
light dawns upon us and we are saturated with wonder –
at the sight of setting sun or starry sky,
or landscape bathed in brilliant winter sun
glistening on newly fallen snow.

Then in silence and solitude
we know what is beyond knowing –

then a serenity sweeps over our souls
and we know all is gift,
for we did not create ourselves nor our world –
not sun or moon,
not the air we breathe,
not the restless surf locked under miles of ice,
unable to caress the sandy beach.
Then we know we are part of something so much larger
than the narrow parameters
of our daily experience and limited understanding.

Before the wonder of it all,
we sense we are embraced, caught up in something
the dimensions of which we cannot begin to take in –
that Mystery that has addressed us,
eliciting from us in turn the response of address,
when from our depths we utter, “O God.”
Then, knowing beyond knowing,
we know we have been found by our Source
and in turn have found our resting place.
Source and resting place,
present to us in mysterious and gracious Presence –
it is enough.
Only gratitude fills our being.

O God, in moments of awareness
when we are attentive, present to the awesome gift of life,
the beauty, the marvel of it all,
the potential of the human creature,
whose consciousness is the consciousness of the cosmos,
whose voice is the speech of Being,
we are lost in wonder, love and praise.

June lived with such deep awareness and wonder.
June was one of those rare persons,
embracing the world, feeling deep passion
and able to bring truth and beauty to expression
through her gift of artistry.
And her love of bird and flower and earth's grandeur
brought to expression in her art
was a faint sign of her deep love of those
in her intimate circle of family and beyond.

Deep lover she was, whose embrace
gave assurance that all would be well
and the best was yet to be.

The grace and dignity with which she responded
to tragedy and deep hurt
evidenced one of great soul –
and enabled those who lived in the ambience of her grace
to move on without bitterness, with love and hope.
All of this was the fruit of her deep rootedness
in Your Love, O God.

You uphold us with everlasting arms.
You overshadow us with a gracious Presence.
You bear us up on eagle's wings;
beneath your sheltering wings we find refuge and peace.

Sacred Mystery of all being, of our being,
consciously aware of our lives in your light,
we worship.

We know that all will be well,
all will be well.
All manner of things will be well.

Now, while our hearts are open, our spirits tender,
mantle us with Your gentle grace.
Assuage deep grief.
Heal us, O God; heal us now.

And now, as Jesus taught us, we pray,

*Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be Thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For Yours is the kingdom and the power
and the glory forever.
Amen.*