

Love Never Ends
Fred Meijer Memorial Service
Meditation

I Corinthians 13; Luke 10:25-37

Richard A. Rhem
Sunshine Community Church
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Let me begin by saying what an honor it is to conduct the funeral of Fred Meijer. That must be obvious; what a man! I'm grateful to the family for inviting me to bring the funeral meditation.

As I have been thinking about little else since receiving the call that Fred was stricken and then that he died, Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* came to mind. Caesar has been betrayed by his trusted friend Brutus; he is assassinated, Brutus pointing to Caesar's ambition and the peril he presented to empire – and then Mark Antony is invited to speak. Remember those lines – “Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears.” With great irony he says,

*I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.
The evil that men do lives after them;
The good is oft interred with their bones.*

I smiled as those lines came to my consciousness for I knew at this moment I would be reversing what Mark Antony claimed –

*I come not to bury Fred Meijer;
I come to praise him!*

In other words, although my roots are Dutch Reformed, this will not be a Calvinist funeral sermon! With Fred, evil was non-existent; the good he has done will live on for generations.

Has it not been amazing in the days following Fred's death how Fred stories have been told, literally by thousands who had the good fortune to be encountered by him and upon whom he bestowed grace, love, compassion and generosity. This was no ordinary human being and I make that claim without fear of contradiction.

Where would one begin the list of adjectives by which to describe him? His authenticity, his simplicity, his humility, his generosity, compassion, passion for

justice, his brilliance, his courage, his business acumen...but we all know that and we marvel at him – the way he was.

But rather than pointing to the amazing human being he was, let me share the dimension of Fred of which I am aware because of experience with him which goes back about a decade.

In the 1990's, serving the congregation of Christ Community in Spring Lake, I stirred up some theological controversy. One of my members was one of Fred's skiing buddies and Fred would ask him how his preacher was doing.

As in the whole spectrum of the human endeavor, so in religion and theology, Fred had an insatiable appetite. He was curious. He had his own very well-honed ideas and insights but he loved thoughtful probing and serious conversation. One day my member suggested lunch and thus began our friendship. What fun it was – he with his brilliant mind and well thought out insights loved to push and prod this preacher as you can imagine. He was delightful, not disrespectful nor rude but acute in pointing to so much in institutional religion and dogma that didn't fare well before critical thought and common sense. Those were fun conversations and more often than not we were in agreement.

A couple of times the lunch included Duncan Littlefair, famed long-time pastor of Fountain Street Church and notorious as the voice of the liberal in the bastion of Dutch Calvinism. I remember the twinkle in Fred's eyes when he related his first meeting with Duncan. It was at an airport I think. And Fred said to Duncan, "I would come to your church if you weren't so conservative!" I'm not sure Duncan quite knew how to respond but Fred had his fun.

Well those lunches were feasts and I am not referring to the food. Can you imagine the fun and energy and deep probing that occurred! For about a decade I had had lunch every Tuesday with Duncan at Dubas. The whole theological spectrum was present but the communion transcended our differing perspectives and bonded us into a marvelous community.

I relate this to you to explain why I am doing Fred's funeral. In 2004 I conducted Duncan Littlefair's funeral and Fred was present. We spoke following the service and, as son Hank said to me yesterday, "I think that is when dad decided he would like you to do his funeral." I suppose he thought if I could get Duncan into heaven maybe I could assist him too.

Well, as a matter of fact, I've never known anyone of a deeper spiritual life, who followed the Way of Jesus any more than Fred Meijer. I Corinthians 13 is sometimes called Paul's Hymn of Love. It reads like a description of Fred.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it

*does not rejoice in wrong doing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things.
Love never ends.*

Don't you recognize Fred in that description of love?

Jesus didn't write letters as did St. Paul; he told stories, and finally it is in story that truth shines most brightly. You are not surprised, I'm sure, that for Fred's funeral meditation I selected Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan. The religious establishment was greatly threatened by Jesus because the common people heard him gladly and sensed he carried authority in contrast to the religious "authorities." So they tried to trip him up. A lawyer put him on the spot with a question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus pointed to the law and asked, "What do you read?" The lawyer answered, "Love God, love your neighbor." Jesus responded, "Do this and you will live."

But the lawyer wasn't through. He asked, "And who is my neighbor?"

It is in response to that question that Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan. The man who is robbed, beaten and left to die is passed by by a priest and a Levite. But the Samaritan – one of the despised ethnic groups – ministers to the wounded man, takes him to an inn and pays his way. In a word, he shows compassion.

So Mr. Lawyer, which one was the neighbor? Obviously the one who showed mercy.

The story is so simple, so clear; the meaning is so obvious:

*What do I do to inherit eternal life?
Love God and your neighbor.
Who is my neighbor?
The one in need who crosses your path.*

Fred Meijer has been a Good Samaritan literally to thousands, has he not?

I could wax eloquent at this point, taking the part of the lawyer in the story or the serious Calvinist community in which Fred lived and raise all sorts of theological questions and objections, but I won't. I think you get my point:

Paul's portrait of love is a portrait of Fred;
Jesus' Good Samaritan who embodies the way to eternal life
portrays the way Fred has lived his whole life.

Fred didn't bother much about heaven. When you live heaven on earth for nearly 92 years, why should you? Enough is enough!

But I wonder...I remember at one of our lunches Fred sat on my left. At one point he leaned forward, looked me in the eye with that irrepressible smile and asked, "How would you answer if someone asked you if they were going to heaven?"

Well, I suppose I stumbled and stammered until Fred told me of the time when Lena's mother, of strong Lutheran faith, failing in health, asked Fred if he thought she would go to heaven.

Well, not really certain of pearly gates, yet ever kind and sensitive, he said, "Grandma, if anybody is going to heaven, you are!"

Wonderful gracious ambiguity!

Thinking about Fred, I hear Paul's words, "Love never ends."

Paul goes on to acknowledge that now, in our present existence, we "see in a mirror dimly – there is so much we do not know, mysteries we've not yet probed. But St. Paul writes,

*Now we see in a mirror dimly
But then face to face.
Now I know in part;
then I will know fully...*

Recently another most unusual human being died – Steve Jobs – universally recognized as a genius who has changed our world just as Fred changed retailing. Steve, of course, was no Fred Meijer in human relationships. Through much of his life he was a terror to those who worked for him and, in earlier years, very difficult for his family. But he did mellow and had time to contemplate his death. In her Eulogy, his sister told of his last moments. His family was around him. He looked at them and smiled and then looked beyond them as it were and said,

"Oh wow! Oh wow! Oh wow!"

His last words.

Paul writes, "Love never ends."

Fred lived the way to eternal life. He lived a Wow! for all his days.

Had I been with him at the end and he popped grandma's question – "Will I go to heaven?", my response would have been instant: "If you won't, I don't want to!"

Who knows what mysteries lie before us? But this I do believe: love never ends,
and our Good Samaritan who lived so fully, so richly – indeed, who lived a Wow!
– is simply amazed by Grace beyond his wildest dream.