

A Profile in Love

Celebrating the Life of Dorothy Kruizenga Boelens

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, 11, 13; I Corinthians 13; John 14:1-3

Richard A. Rhem
St. John's Episcopal Church
Grand Haven, Michigan

August 1, 2013

We gather in worship to give God thanks for the life of Dorothy Kruizenga Boelens and to celebrate her life, lived so fully, so well. In preparation for the service I went to my Kruizenga file – Richard and Kathryn, Georgia, Stella, most recently Margaret. I am very much aware that the meditations I have offered all have in the beginning my own story, as my life has been impacted by the Kruizenga family. I am a bit self conscious about that but I cannot help myself – my life has been shaped by the Kruizenga clan and I am, at times like this, so acutely aware that I owe so much to the family and to no one more than Dorothy.

Just two months ago I expressed at Margaret's service how entwined my life has been with this family and I must do so once more for no one has been as responsible for all I have become and the community we shared for so many years as Dorothy Boelens. And making that claim, expressing my debt, my gratitude, my love, I include you, Gord. Without your complete support and full involvement and generous provision, it could not have happened.

But on this occasion of the celebration of Dorothy's life, I say without reservation, she saved my life, was responsible for the wellbeing of my children – for whom it was Aunt Dort and Uncle Gord – and made possible my ministry in Spring Lake and the renewal, rebirth and creation of Christ Community, in which we shared such rich community life. No one was more key than she. Her father, with great wisdom and finesse brought the congregation to the decision to invite me to return, risky decision that it was, given my personal circumstances, facing divorce and custody struggles. But it was Dort who made it work. So many were so gracious and helpful, but Dort filled in all the blanks. I could regale you with story after story but it would take the day.

Just one accomplishment – she arranged for me to meet the love of my life – Nancy. She probably knew if her life was ever to return to normal, my life would have to find normalcy. What better way than to lead me to the beautiful lady who would become my wife and a mother to my children. On Christmas Day, 1972, Gord and Dort stood with us as we spoke our vows. But that was only Act I. In the days of explosive growth and renewal, Dorothy was front and center.

Bob Schuller's Institute for Church Growth in California was new. I think nine of us went out there, Gord and Dort among the nine. We came home and implemented a plan for renewal and growth. R.J. Kruizenga was our volunteer Business Manager. We went from one to two to three morning services and the congregation voted to change our name from The First Reformed Church to Christ Community Church and on the same evening extended a call to Gordon Van Hoeven whom the congregation had sent into the ministry in the early '60's. The vote for the call was 124 yes, 7 no, and for the next eighteen years Gord tried to discover who the 7 were! And then the name change: Dort's mother, Kathryn, a consistory wife responsible to cut the pies, wagered I wouldn't get such a margin on the name change proposal but, wonder of wonders, the vote was 120 yes, 4 no.

"Ladies in the kitchen" was the way it was. Consistory and Ministers were men only! It was Dort's Aunt Stella who broke that threshold, our first woman elder, the first in the Muskegon Classis and one of the first in the RCA and there was no one finer anywhere.

With growth in members and growing programs, no way Gordon and I could keep up. At that time the paraprofessional idea was blooming and we formed a paraprofessional team that worked wonders. Dorothy was on the first team and served faithfully and fruitfully for several years. Her Young Moms' Group was a great success. One blizzardy winter day, school was canceled, roads weren't plowed, the parking lot wasn't plowed, but from my study in the parsonage I watched them arrive – young moms with babies in tow. They were not about to miss their weekly gathering. Such was the importance of that group for those young women and Dorothy was their Mother Superior. She was quite amazing in so many ways – very intelligent, with fine gifts of leadership, organization, and vision – and she brought her best gifts and full energy to our ministry at Christ Community.

There is an Honor Roll of persons and families who have given their all and given well. That is always the way with social movement, community endeavors and especially congregations. It has been true for our congregation. Familiar names – many of you can list them as you look back on the history of the Spring Lake congregation. But, in terms of dedication, gifts of leadership and tireless service, Dorothy heads the Honor Roll, flanked by her father and Aunt Stella.

Where does one go in Scripture to find a portrait of such a remarkable disciple? I begin with the Hebrew poet who penned Ecclesiastes. The familiar third chapter takes in the full scope of life in all of its varied experiences:

For everything there is a season
And a time for every activity under heaven.

...

God has made everything beautiful in its own time
And has put an eternal yearning in our hearts
Even as we live before the face of Mystery.

Like the poet, Dort was a realist; she faced every day and every new experience with a healthy perspective, well traditioned, spiritually open, unafraid. She was well grounded and open to what may be opening on the far horizon. The poet somehow got into the Hebrew Bible canon but sometimes that surprises me when I read some of his wonderings, some of his doubts, some of his questions. He dared to look at life in all its ambiguity and confess in many instances he just didn't get it – even in the ultimate matter of life and death. He writes,

...the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies so does the other. They all have the same breath and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity. All go to one place, all are from the dust and all turn to dust again. Who knows whether the human spirit goes upward and the spirit of animals goes downward to the earth?

He had no doubt that God is and God rules but as for the human situation – he simply couldn't figure it out and he was honest enough and healthy enough to live with his questions. Yet, he affirms,

God has made everything beautiful in its own time

And he senses as well that God

Has put an eternal yearning in our hearts.

Dort was a person of faith, curious, questioning, but not pious. Invite her to a theology class and she would be there. Don't expect her to start a women's prayer group. She lived a wholesome spirituality, loved to think, to wonder. She was a healthy model for me, enabling me to move beyond the pietism with which I arrived in Spring Lake in 1960.

My primary focus in this reflection is St. Paul's Love Chapter, I Corinthians 13.

I point out the context of Paul's Love Chapter, not because of the nature of the tensions and divisions in the Corinthian congregation, but rather just the fact that the congregation was in a troubled state and how that stands in contrast to our Christ Community experience. And why? Because of wise and competent lay leadership. Names of beloved friends and leaders come to mind but in the context of the celebration of Dorothy's life, I think of R.J., her father, Stella, her aunt, to say nothing of her mother Kathryn who kept the consistory wives in order as well as the pizza makers.

Dort had a keen sense of where the future lay, what we should be doing, where we should be moving. And she so loved the church community. She would not have been caught up in any proud and ostentatious display of piety; that was not Dort. But no matter what might become an issue in our community life, she was open-minded, big-hearted, intelligent, and wise. Paul could have used her in Corinth; I'm thankful I had her here.

Addressing the turmoil in Corinth, Paul wrote a Profile in Love. As chapter 12 ends, Paul writes,

But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way. (Verse 31).

In the first paragraph he declares no spiritual gift amounts to anything if love in its exercise is absent. Have we not all at some time or other witnessed a noisy gong and clanging cymbal Christian piety? We have witnessed ostentatious display of religious knowledge and boastful religious claims or proud offering of gifts. Not Dort. Paul could be describing her practical, caring, everyday living out of her following the way of Jesus as he writes,

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 wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends.

That's St. Paul's Profile of Love. I submit to you it is a profile of Dorothy. Perhaps at this point you suspect I am making her some ethereal angel. Not really. Dort was a very remarkable person and in her practical, capable, caring ways she made love concrete. There were no limits to her caring, no hesitancy to her extending concrete care and aid. There was not a negative bone in her body, no pettiness, no jealousy, no negativity.

Do I overstate the case? I don't think so. I knew her intimately over many years in so many concrete situations, professional, personal, social. She was a rare human being. And thus I point you to Paul's last paragraph – a beautiful expression of the now and the then – our present in the mists of history's ongoing saga and the then of that future vision that awaits us, which in trust we await for ourselves and celebrate for our dear Dorothy.

Remember again the context: St. Paul's dealing with a congregation divided by rival claims to spiritual superiority. His antidote? Love – deep-down practical love expressed in personal and community relationships – common graces that are so uncommon – kindness, openness, forbearance, delight in the true, the good and the beautiful, never arrogant or rude or negative. And then he says, you know, we really don't know so much. History is foggy; we see only dimly, in a mirror as it were. In fact, as we all once thought as a child and, thankfully, grew up, matured and put away childish things, so it is in life's ultimate issues and questions. We who have grown up and put away childish ways remain, as a matter of fact, in our childhood when it comes to the grand scheme of things. We live before the face of Mystery. We do not *know*; we live by *trust* if we are wise, mature, aware. So there is no place for arrogant absolutism or too certain dogmatism. Humility befits us.

But that is not Paul's last word. In terms of the cosmic drama in which we are caught up, we trust; we don't see clearly –

Now we see in a mirror, dimly,

But he goes on with this marvelous affirmation:

but then we will see face to face.

And he continues,

I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

In sum:

Faith, hope, love abide...and the greatest of these is love.

Our Dorothy knew that, lived that. She lived that. She lived with some questions unanswered and wasn't ready to accept a preacher's too easy answers without facing the depth of the issues, and to live with questions, not having all the answers, gave her no pause. She lived by faith! Her trust was in the good and gracious God; she rested there.

But Love? Oh my, she loved without limit to one and all – generous to a fault! And as to life's ultimate questions shrouded in mystery – St. Paul writes,

...now dimly...but then face to face!

While with us she loved us, living in faith and hope, living the questions.

And now she knows! And I suspect it is more than she dared dream of!

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