

Funeral Meditation
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
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Betty Jean Stephanoff
May 23, 1924 – January 10, 2020

“Who will separate us from the love of Christ?” Those words seem awfully poignant at the time of death. Because we are human, we cannot see beyond what is in front of us. We know only this world in which we live. We know only the family who raises us, the childhood friends we pal around with, the colleagues we work with, our closest loved ones who nurture us. We know only what it is like to laugh with them, to cry with them, to learn from them, to be comforted by them. This is how God created us, to be in relationship with one another. We know no other way. Even though we are told there is more to life than this world, it is something we must try and accept in faith.

Yet the Apostle Paul is very direct and strong-willed when it comes to eternal life. That life is ruled by Jesus Christ. In that life, there are no shootings or violent acts against innocent human beings. There are no diseases or illnesses which cannot be cured. There is no hatred or abuse or famine. The life which Christ rules is one of peace and hope. It is a life which we have been promised in his life, death, and resurrection. It is a life which is unlike anything which we can know now, but will ultimately know if we only have an inkling of faith in him.

In his Letter to the Romans, Paul reassures us of this eternal hope by exhorting the church to believe in God’s boundless love for us. No matter what we may suffer through in this world, no one can separate us from God’s love in Jesus Christ. “Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us” (8:35,37). The trials and tribulations we may go through now are nothing in comparison to how God has loved us in his Son, Jesus Christ. That is the promise, the comfort, the assurance we have as Christians that life is indeed better because God first loved us. “(Nothing) in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (8:39).

When we experience death and loss, we feel anxious, uncertain, even afraid. It can be unsettling to realize that the loved one we have known for so much of our lives will no longer be present with us.

That is why I so appreciate this passage from John’s Gospel when we gather as the church at times of grief and death. As Jesus shared one last meal with his disciples in an upper room, he knew his friends 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." It is because of that faith that I know I will see and you will see Betty and so many others very, very soon, as we will meet in the many dwelling places that our Lord has prepared for us.

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 lamp stand, and it give light to all in the house" (Matthew 5:14-15). The light which Jesus spoke of is a source of energy, love, and hope to others that there is more to this world than what you see around you. 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 gathered here today because one woman shared that light with us all. Betty Stephanoff was a child of God whose light shone brightly to so many people. She loved life and all that was a part of it. She was quiet and preferred to be behind-the-scenes. But her love and care for others was immeasurable. As her daughter, Susan, told me, "She kept Hallmark in business!" Whether it was her family, friends, neighbors, church family, or even strangers – she always put others first, a true sign of how her faith guided her in her daily life.

And that trait shone through in numerous ways. She was deeply supportive of her husband, Mero, through all of their 67 years of marriage, and of their daughter, Susan, and her family. After she retired, she continued to seek to give back to her community, giving of her time as a volunteer at the Brownsburg library and at the Chaplain's Office at Methodist Hospital. She was intentional about asking how you were doing, and made you feel welcome whenever you were in her presence.

And even though she suffered these many years at the end of her life with dementia and Alzheimer's Disease, that didn't rob her completely of what God had given her in her life. The gifts of love and compassion and kindness were at the very core of her being, and God's light still shone through Betty even in these final days of her earthly life.

Our challenge today is: what will we do with that light now that we have received it ourselves? How are we to witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, at the time of death, and every day of our life? The first step is to live a life of discipleship. Betty Stephanoff lived such a life, and she is our reminder to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and mind,

and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. For in our daily living we are showing others the love of Christ in so many ways, we may never know how we have touched others until we are gone from this place.

The second step is to believe: believe in a God who will not take “no” for an answer; believe in a God who shakes our world to its core with Easter morning; believe that there is more to what we see, what we hear, what we experience in this world; believe that nothing – not even death – will separate us from God’s love.

“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.