

FUNERAL FOR MARY LEHMANN | JANUARY 19, 2024

ISAIAH 65:17-20 | PSALM 23 | ROMANS 14:7-12 | JOHN 14:1-6, 25-27

When I was in seminary, one of the deans told me that if you want to start a new call on the right foot, on your first day in the office you should call the homebound congregants and set up home visits. One reason is it will get you out of the office. The other reason is because they will call their church friends and tell them how nice the new pastor is.

So when I got here, I was glad that our interim had left me a list of all our homebound members with their phone numbers. And sure enough, Mary Lehmann's name was right at the top. So starting that week and about once a month after that, I would bring her communion and we would talk about what was going on in her life, what was going on at church, what was happening in the world, whatever Animal Planet show she'd gotten hooked on. And when you talk to someone like that frequently over the course of a few years, you get to develop a pretty good sense of them.

One was that Mary was someone who cared about her family a lot. She always used to enjoy telling me about what her grandkids were up to or explaining the old pictures she kept up on her front entry way. Another is that Mary was someone who had a good sense of humor. Even when I would visit her in a hospital or a rehab center and she would have every reason to be morose, Mary still could find the moments of levity. That sense of humor was also a relief at times because Mary was not someone who was not shy with her opinions, be they about something she saw on TV (frequent) or something she read in the church newsletter (rare, thankfully).

But the most important was that Mary was someone of great faith. Mary's faith was great not because it was particularly exciting or pious, but because she understood that it was all about God's great love given to us in Jesus. Mary was not someone who put life over here and faith over there. No, Mary saw her whole life in service of God's love.

That is part of what makes her death so difficult, and why we grieve her loss. And yet, Jesus tells us in today's gospel reading, "Do not let [your hearts] be afraid." Not because life isn't challenging. Not because grief isn't hard. Not because death isn't real. But because there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God. Not the challenges of life. Not the pangs of grief. Not the veil of death.

Mary's death is not the end. As St. Paul writes, "For we do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves." Mary did not live to herself. She lived for her family, her friends, her fellow church members, not to mention those animals who needed helping. But most important, Mary lived in Christ. Mary understood that because of her baptism, she was a beloved and cherished child of God. And her vocation was to extend that same love and grace to others. She lived in Christ to help others grow in Christ.

But Mary did not just live in Christ. As St. Paul encourages us, she also died in Christ. And so God's great love that so inspired her life greets her even more fully in death. No more weeping. No more distress. Just the unending banquet of Christ's presence that we receive a foretaste of at this table each Sunday.

Where together with Mary and the entire communion of saints, we join what our final hymn describes this way. "Then the holy holy holy celebration jubilee thine the splendor thine the brightness only thee only thee."

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

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