

Funeral Homily Noel Schalk
April 12, 2016
Grace, River Forest

Isaiah 25:6-9
Revelation 5:11-14
John 20:11-18

Gifts from God

In Jesus' name. Amen

I learned Noel Schalk's middle name last week, Donata, Gift. And I realized how from this "match made in heaven" of Noel Donata Roeder and Carl F. Schalk so many gifts from God have flowed.

It's probably not surprising that singing in a choir played a role in Carl and Noel's first crossing paths, in the Kapelle Choir at Concordia, River Forest. After two years of college, Noel was sent out to teach at a Lutheran school in Buffalo, New York. But in August 1953 Noel was united in marriage to Carl Schalk at her home church, Bethany, on North Avenue in Chicago. Her dad, the Rev. Paul Roeder, did the honors. Carl remembers his father-in-law turning to him and saying, "You may kiss the bride." After the ceremony, Carl's mother said to Noel's mother, "That's the first time I saw Carl kiss Noel. You know, our family isn't much given to outward displays of affection." Whereupon Noel's mother replied: "Boy, did he marry into the wrong family!" But, of course, as the years have shown, Carl married into exactly the right family!

Growing up in a pastor's family, Noel learned early about practicing hospitality. Her mother always put an extra potato or two into the pot because Noel's dad often invited church visitors home with him for Sunday dinner. Noel and her siblings soon learned the KHB code at the dinner table: KHB, Kids Hold Back. And like her mother before her, Noel had a gift for hospitality: taking turns with the Boumans and Luekings in hosting Cantata preachers for over 25 years, putting on after-concert parties for Concordia choirs, entertaining speakers and other guests during the annual Lectures in Church Music.

All of this, as Carl points out, was above and beyond caring for her family. "She brought up the kids," Carl says, starting with getting three children under the age of four dressed and ready for church on Sunday mornings. Through the years, Noel patiently helped all three youngsters with their music lessons, especially Becky with the oboe. Noel loved to cook, and both Jan and Becky take after their mom, Carl said. But Noel also helped provide care for her extended family – visiting her mother every day as her health declined, to bathe her and fix her hair. And for years, Noel brought home-cooked meals to two maiden aunts who lived on Sheridan Road in Chicago. "She always enjoyed feeding people," Becky said.

Noel was also an accomplished seamstress – making vestments for her dad and sport coats for Carl. And her service extended well beyond her family. Noel

sang in the Grace choir for many years after the Schalks moved here from St. Louis. And many years ago, she made the funeral pall that rests on her coffin today, which has reminded so many members of this church that in his death and resurrection, Christ has us covered.

Soon after the Schalks moved to this area, Noel was invited to share a position at Concordia as academic advisor to freshmen and sophomore students. It wasn't long before she and her colleague were asked to serve as advisors for the whole student body, including grad students. Jan has college friends who remember how her mother could sort out their class scheduling conflicts with no difficulty. Noel became a kind of surrogate mother to students, in more areas than one. And while working at Concordia, Noel also completed her bachelor's degree and a master's. After retiring as academic advisor, Noel then served several years in Concordia's computer department. Carl had retired from Concordia in 1993 and had rearranged the kitchen drawers in their house, he said, "the way God had intended them to be. Noel retired in June 1994," Carl continued, "and undid all my work on the kitchen drawers." The Schalks had a rule among themselves for when they were out in public: "Never embarrass the family." Needless to say, it was not because of Noel that that rule was established.

Growing up, the Schalk kids weren't sure what they wanted to do with their lives, except they did know that they didn't want to be teachers like their parents. It's hard to know where the kids went wrong: Tim taught for two years right out of college at Trinity Lutheran in Roselle, and informally teaches clients now about possible environmental issues on their property. Jan, after years of teaching and administration at the Hong Kong International School, is now a prof at Valparaiso University, and received VU's Excellence in Teaching Award last year. Becky is not only an oboe prof at the University of South Carolina: she also directs an outreach program called Spark, to help university music students engage with the community. "Our mother and dad," Becky said, "let us kids go, and always supported us in what we chose to do." Noel raised her daughters to be strong women, and didn't do too badly with son Tim either. When his wife Ingrid was awaiting a pastoral call after seminary, Tim said, "Ingrid followed me around in my work all these years. Now it's my turn to follow her."

Noel really loved the opportunities she and Carl had for travel through the years: to places like Scotland and England, Thailand, Borneo and Fiji, Easter Island. They made 18 trips to Hong Kong during the years Jan and her family were there. "I still have this picture in my mind," Jan said, "of Mom down on the floor playing with her grandsons, Peter and Brian, when I came home from my day at HKIS."

There are family photos of Noel parasailing above the island of Phuket that her grandkids thought were “so cool.” Noel thoroughly enjoyed her parasailing adventure, saying it was “so quiet up in the sky.” I don’t know; perhaps that was just in comparison with being with Carl.

In September 2011 Noel fell and broke several ribs. They healed in a matter of months, only to have several other ribs broken in a second fall. And that’s when Alzheimer’s seemed to take hold of Noel, and when Miranda joined the Schalk household and family, as Noel’s caretaker, another gift from God. Noel’s weight at one point was only 98 pounds, but through Miranda’s cooking and cajoling, it increased to 130 pounds. And Noel – who never ate desserts her whole life – made up for it with Miranda, especially when Miranda learned to make the recipe for crumb coffee cake, which had been passed down to Noel from her mother. Noel had some every morning. Despite the Alzheimer’s, some of Noel’s essence, her essential core, remained for several years. After supper every night, as they went through the kitchen, Noel always stopped at the sink and gave Miranda a nod. The meaning was clear: “Don’t forget to do the dishes and clean out the sink.” And at night, when Miranda tucked Noel into bed, Noel always said, “Thank you. Thank you.”

In John's Gospel, Mary Magdalene had come to the tomb early in the morning, "while it was still dark." She had not come to anoint Jesus' body with spices. In John's Gospel that had already been done by Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea when they buried Jesus. Mary had come to mourn. But what distressed her so much was that Jesus' body was missing, nowhere to be found. I think this is the first thing that today's Gospel teaches us: how important the body of a loved one is to us, even if that loved one is dead, or much of their "essence" seems to be gone. Mary Magdalene couldn't rest until she found the body of her Lord. Carl and Miranda and the whole Schalk family existed these past five years to honor and care for Noel and her body.

But there is more of a connection between Mary Magdalene and Noel than that. According to Luke's Gospel, after Jesus cast out seven demons and restored Mary Magdalene's life, Mary became one of the women who followed Jesus and helped provide for the whole community that was "with him." From her baptism on, Noel also followed her Lord and used her unique gifts and resources to help care for the body of Christ, in so many ways.

It was not until the man in the garden who Mary supposed to be the gardener said her name, "Mary," that Mary Magdalene recognized him as Jesus, her teacher and Lord, alive, risen from the dead. Noel surely had her ability to

recognize loved ones blurred by Alzheimer's. But not even Alzheimer's was able to rob Noel of her true identity – as a beloved child of God, as a beloved wife, mother, grandmother and sister, as a sheep of Christ's own fold and a sinner of God's own redeeming. She retained to the end her true identity, in the eyes of you, her loved ones, and in God's eyes, as well. And like Mary Magdalene, Noel has been a witness to the risen Christ, ever since Christ first called her by name in baptism, Noel Donata, gift of God.

In the many gatherings she hosted, Noel provided something of a foretaste of God's own feast described by the prophet Isaiah, on that day when God will swallow up death forever and wipe away the tears from all faces. We have a foretaste of that feast here today. And in choirs and congregation through the years, Noel joined her voice to that of the saints below and saints above, in "the holy holy holy celebration jubilee," ..."the feast of victory for our God."

Last Wednesday, Noel saw the risen Christ face-to-face, and heard Christ speak her name once more, "Noel Donata, gift of God." And oh, how she will enjoy the feast prepared for her, and add her own alleluias, to the choirs of angels singing her to rest.

In Jesus' name. Amen