

Sermon – John 13:31-34
David R. Lyle
Grace Lutheran Church
Julie Hinz Memorial Service
30 November 2024

Clarence and Ellen; Lisa, Paul, and David; Eunice and Marilyn; family and friends; sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Even after a month, I can't quite manage to wrap my head or my heart around the fact that Julie is gone. Surely, she's about to pop into my office, the only question being whether she's there to offer a witty wisecrack or an insightful comment about the faith. Or maybe just to talk about work, which was always more than just work. It was, for Julie, always about the community we have in Christ, and making room within that community especially for those who feel they might not fit. Just a week or so before she went into Loyola, she expertly arranged this year's First FEAST, the initial gathering for the year of our small groups at Grace, working hard in the background so that others could develop new and deeper old relationships. Surely, for Julie, there's more work to be done. More tears to be shed. More, much more, big laughter to be shared.
2. We are here today, of course, because such things will not be. Disease and death have taken Julie from us. Much too quickly, much too soon. We are here because, while we have beautifully and wonderfully made by God, our bodies are earthen vessels, clay jars. They break down. Julie was no stranger to her own mortality, having lived with kidney disease and welcomed a new kidney, Oscar, into her body. But in the end, it was a random virus most of us had heard of but knew little about that took her life. Truly, in spite of what we may imagine, life in this world is a frail and fragile thing.

3. Jesus, in his great love for us, enters into the fullness of our life, including that thing we all have in common: death. Jesus knows our pain and our loss. In today's Gospel, chosen, along with the other readings and music by Julie, Jesus witnesses one of his closest friends leave to betray him into the hands of those who would soon put him to death. Death on a cross. But in what seems to us the most painful, awful thing, Jesus discerns the glory of God at work. Jesus, born to redeem this world so loved by God, will die. But in his death, freely accepted, Jesus demonstrates the glory of a God who will do anything and everything to bring us out of sin and suffering and death, into life. In his death, we find life, on both sides of the grave.

4. Raised in a Lutheran home among a deeply faithful family, Julie knew well the promises of our God. She wrestled, at times, with these promises in a life that was not always easy for her. Julie knew a bit more than her fair share of disappointments and dead ends. But this somehow always led her to trust Christ all the more. It gave her a deep well of empathy, out of which was born a sense of call. I am beyond grateful that, in these last few years of her life, Julie discovered such joy and passion in her ministry here at Grace. Entering into the process of becoming a deaconess was the natural extension of her ministry. She loved the community she discovered and she delighted in the learning along the way. On the day of her death, with loved ones gathered at Loyola, she was made an honorary deaconess, a role in which she would have blessed many in Christ's church. She was a gift to so many of us, from the older to the very young. To the Stephen Ministry community. To our church and school staff, who grieve her absence daily. I think especially of you, Eunice and Mo, who have lost a friend who became family. And of you, David, Lisa, and Paul, siblings now with a missing member. And I think especially of you, Ellen and Clarence, for no parents should have their child taken from them at any age. In our grief, we turn to our Father in heaven, who did not withhold his own Son, but sent him to save us.

5. In the face of his own impending death, Jesus Christ gives his friends a new commandment, that we would love one another. Not with just any love, but with the love Jesus has for us. A love that is complete. Unconditional. Forgiving. A love that gives itself away for the sake of others. A love that has no end. Death will come but it will not win the day. In Christ, St. Paul writes, we have found freedom. Freedom to love, cultivating the fruits of the Spirit for the sake of the Kingdom of God. It is striking to me that Julie died on Reformation Day, when we celebrate the freedom and forgiveness that freely flow from the gospel, raising us up for lives of service to our neighbor. Julie lived out her Lutheran heritage, a forgiven sinner set free to care for those around her. And it is striking to me, too, that we gather today on the feast day of St. Andrew. Andrew, you'll recall, was called first by Jesus. It is only through Andrew that Simon, who becomes Peter, comes to Christ. Julie, I think, was an Andrew for many, helping us come into deeper relationship with our Savior.

6. Today we gather because somehow, for reasons we cannot understand, Julie has been taken from us. Our sorrow is deep, for Julie's story wasn't finished. But we also remember, and proclaim to one another, that Julie's story *is not* finished. Jesus who was crucified has been raised. Joined to Christ is baptism, we will be raised, too. Joined to Christ, Julie now lives in the presence and the promises of our God, at the great feast in which death is swallowed up forever, tears are wiped away, and mourning and sorrow are no more. In that hope, we know in faith that Julie lives now in Christ. We wish she were still here. Of that there is no doubt. But we will see her again, and in the midst of our tears and our heartache, we sing alleluias to the Lamb.

7. Julie was both a gifted writer and someone who enjoyed getting the last word, so I'll give it to her today. This from a devotion for Lent in 2023:

“What I do know . . . is that while my physical being will die, my real life is wrapped up in the righteousness of Christ, and the glory that is to come after this body ceases its earthly journey. While my body is subject to death, my soul belongs to Christ and will live eternally with God. Now, having fully grasped that reality, there is no fear, only the deep gratitude for what I do have; a faith family that embraces me, a purpose in ministry to God’s people, and a God who loves me and walks beside me through it all.

Amen, dear Julie. Amen. You are so loved. Rest well, good and faithful servant. We’ll see you when we get there.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.