

Your Kingdom Come

The sermon delivered by Rev. Ruth Mary Frost, Associate Pastor of St. Francis Lutheran Church in San Francisco, at the funeral of her mother Ivern Johnson Frost on the sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Sept. 28, 2003. Texts: Luke 12:32; The Second Petition to the Prayer of Jesus.

First, I want to thank all of you who have been remembering me and my family in your thoughts and prayers following the death of my mother last week. As I smelled the fragrant flowers that the DeLanges sent, I was reminded of the caring presence of this community in the midst of our family's grief. I return to you now as one who is living where grief often puts us, that is, somewhat between two worlds. This world has become, at least for a time, more like a transparent screen to the next. The boundaries between the two worlds seem almost permeable.

On my way to the airport to fly back for my mother's funeral, our car's C. D. player, which had been set on random play between twelve C. D.'s, seemed to have an angelic hand making the selections. Our own Craig Hella Johnson's clear, pure tender voice gave me these words:

“Which of angels will tell us that life goes on? Which of angels will come and lift the stone from the tomb? Shall you for me? Will I for you the angel be?”

This sense of the next world overlaying ours with its heavenly messages was what my mother experienced, too, in the last days before she died. On one of my brother's visits to our mother when she was in hospice, he sat down next to the bed and my mother said, “Well, John, have you spotted her yet?” “Who, Mom?” John replied. “My mother. My sister's here, too.” Gently, John asked, “Is Dad here too?” “No,” she replied cryptically, “Gerhard has been content to keep himself hidden.” When John said that he couldn't see them, she gave him a knowing smile. Then she said, “You know, it really makes you believe in angels. They try to show angels on T.V. but... She paused and John finished her sentence for her, “They can't do them justice?” She smiled again and nodded agreement.

These heavenly messengers were calling her home, emboldening her for the journey and savoring her company. They were saying what angels always say, “Fear not!”

It was a familiar role for my mother, being an angelic messenger for someone in need of encouragement. Many times she had sat with a lesbian seminarian or a gay male pastor struggling to come out while claiming their Christian faith. Many times she had served as surrogate mother or grandmother for those whose blood families could not yet speak the words of affirmation. But my mother could be a rather fiery messenger for God as well. Many times she had stood up for the full inclusion of sexual minority people in the church. I ought to know, for her hands were on my shoulders in blessing at my ordination in 1990.

During the first draft of the 1991 Sexuality Study, mother attempted to influence the outcome of the study by having local bishops and seminary professors come to tea at her house. Heaven help them if they had taken public stands against full inclusion! As she recounted the names of those she had invited, I was curious about why one of them, who shall remain nameless, was not

invited to meet with her. When I asked why not him, she responded, “Oh, Ruth, he’s weak. I don’t bother with the weak ones!”

At the same time that Mother challenged those in positions of power in the Church, she carried on her ministry of affirmation and reconciliation among ordinary people in her home congregation. As University Lutheran Church of Hope was struggling with what it meant to become a reconciling congregation, my mother decided to help build some bridges of her own between populations. She funded and threw her own version of a Gala for Hope Church, personally inviting Hope’s members. Then, because she didn’t want Hope’s gay population to feel uncomfortable and outnumbered, she went on to invite all the gay and lesbian Lutherans she knew through her contacts with Wingspan Ministry and Lutherans Concerned to come to the party. She directed her party coordinators to hire a good swing band to dance to because she knew everyone would respond to swing music. She said, “I want the straight people of Hope to know the gay people of Hope, and I want both to know that we are all children of God and not so different from one another.” I am still hearing about this party from members of Hope and from lesbian and gay Lutherans in the Twin Cities to this day. I am told Hope’s Parish Hall was packed and that Mom’s celebration lasted well into the night.

“Which angel will show us how to endure life? Which angel gives us eyes that can see the fruit in seed? Shall you for me? Will I for you the angel be?”

When the news came from the hospice that my mother’s condition had changed dramatically and swiftly, I was fearful that the ticket I had already purchased for the next day might get me to St. Paul too late to be at my mother’s bedside. Knowing that the last flight had already departed, I asked my brother to hold the phone to my mother’s ear. Across the miles, I sang to her Chris Williamson’s lullaby “Like a Ship in the Harbor.” I then told her she didn’t have to wait for me. She could complete her journey in peace, knowing that we were all at her side through the connections of love which span every distance.

When I got off the phone, our nine year old daughter took my hand and led me into the living room. On the coffee table, Noelle had placed three objects: a picture of my mother, an angel candle she had made at summer camp, and a cross. The three of us gathered around her makeshift altar, the candle’s flame reflected in the glass of my mother’s picture, making her face shine. After several minutes of quiet time together, Noelle disappeared and returned to hand me a card she had made. It read, “In sympathy for a regal lady, a mother and a grandmother; a woman of courage and compassion. She loved us so and we loved her. She was disabled in her body but not in her heart. We will miss her.” When she had finished reading it, Noelle then leaned over and blew out the angel candle. I looked at Phyllis and said, “I’m not going to make it back in time to see Mom. I think I’ve been told.” A moment later, the phone call came, telling me of my mother’s passing.

“Which angel opens our ears to comprehend mysteries? Which angel hands us wings that we may look upon our heaven? Shall you for me? Will I for you the angel be?”

Once home, I visited the place where my mother spent her last few weeks and where angels appeared to her. I stood in her room and listened as the hospice nurse said, “Your Mom died

peacefully. But we all knew that she never really gave up on life. If she could have, she would have gotten right up out of her bed and walked out the front door!" I like to picture her now, standing before the heavenly door, opened wide to receive her, amazed and awed by the images she is receiving. I like to think that she did get right up out of bed and has walked through that door.

"Fear not," the angels tell us, and Jesus echoes, "for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom." For me, that Kingdom is God's vast kingdom constituting a world wide web of international and universal faiths, supported by the Spirit and held in the hands of love. It is the Heavenly Place of Belonging here on earth, which reigns in our hearts when we have the grace to receive it by receiving one another.

As we four adult children began sifting through our parents' lifetime of personal effects, carefully choosing what we could take with us and what would be left for the estate sale necessary in preparation for the sale of the house, I wondered: How do you decide which object will adequately reflect 91 years of human life? How can any object carry the weight of human and divine love? As we all picked out what we wanted to bring back to our respective homes, the house began to die the same slow death as our mother, slowly stripped of all the things which made it her home. Cleaning out her desk, I came across a bundle of carefully saved and copiously underlined sermons I had sent her over the years. I thought, "Who on earth will care about reading and re-reading my sermons as she has? Not even the good people of St. Francis!" As my brother summed it up, "I won't miss the 91 year old woman who was gasping for breath the last year of her life. I will miss the woman who mothered me all my life; who was unconditionally in my corner and who loved me with a bias that was as irrational as it was generous."

I'm feeling slightly dislocated now with my mother's departure and the disassembly of her house. But I am being ministered to by angels who are teaching me anew about what the kingdom of God is and where to find home. I listen carefully as the sweet voice of Craig Johnson, who shares my mother's family name, sings again:

"In the cathedrals of New York and Rome, there is the feeling that you should just go home, and spend a lifetime learning just where that is."

Fear not! For it is your Mother's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. May it be gathered here on earth as it is already being gathered in heaven. Thanks be to God!