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Meditation
Memorial Service for Elizabeth Downing Heller

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August 24, 2019

It will not surprise anyone that Liz planned her own memorial service. She approached death with a kind of wide-eyed honesty and practicality. There would be a service in the sanctuary. Four hymns, three scripture readings, some poetry, remembrances, and the Westminster Choir. Watanabe would be on the cover.

The service would focus on the bold claim of our faith that “life and love can never die,” as she said. “That winter always brings the spring, that after sleep we wake again, that life goes on and love remains.”

Now Liz said nothing of the sorrow and tears that may also make an appearance on this day. She was focused on praising God and the joy with which she lived and the great pleasure she found in life. But for us there is at least a pinch of sorrow today. After all, even with a long, full, wonderful life, when death comes, it is so definitive it causes a quick and lasting pain in the heart. Death

has a way of shifting the world so that it never looks quite the same again.

We miss her.

“When I tread the verge of Jordan,” the hymn Liz chose says,

“Bid my anxious fears subside.
Death of death and hell’s destruction,
Land me safe on Canaan’s side.
Songs of praises, songs of praises,
I will ever give to thee; I will ever give to thee.”

Liz has trod the verge of Jordan and landed safe on Canaan’s side. There was never any doubt in her mind about where the adventure of life would eventually deposit her when the time came.

“Who has not found the Heaven *below*,” Emily Dickinson wrote, “will fail of it *above*.”

Liz certainly found it here on earth. In the simple beauty of her family’s farm in Ohio. In the experiences she had as a young person in the church. In traveling the world. In the color and stories and images of art. In campus ministry. In a congregation that claimed her so many, many years ago, and that she claimed right back. In deep and lasting friendships, and shared meals and flowers on the table.

Oh yes, Liz found “the heaven below” and surely has not “failed of it above.”

I remember when I first encountered, maybe the word is “experienced,” Liz Heller. It was at a gathering here at Westminster shortly after I arrived. She was splendidly adorned in blue, accented with large pieces of jewelry and a huge grin. “*I know you,*” she announced, “At least I know your parents and your in-laws. We went to seminary together.”

That encounter was 20 years ago, and in that moment she and I bonded.

As a student at Ohio State in the 1940s she and my father-in-law served together on the Executive Committee of the national Presbyterian young adult movement called Westminster Fellowship. After college Liz felt called to seminary, as did my father-in-law and my dad. They all ended up at seminary together in Chicago. Liz overlapped with them at McCormick Seminary in Chicago. The men would both graduate and immediately enter ordained ministry. That’s how it was in those days. It would take almost three decades before a patient but persistent Liz Heller would finally fulfill her call to serve as an ordained minister.

The seminary professors my father and father-in-law remembered – all men – were not the same ones Liz spoke about. Liz was especially pleased to have been a student of Hulda Niebuhr, the first woman to be named a full professor at

McCormick. Hulda, older sister to her more famous brothers H. Richard and Reinhold, became a mentor to Liz. They learned a lot from her.

Professor Niebuhr believed in the use of art and drama and story as a way to teach, and she encouraged her students to embrace creativity to communicate our faith. Liz certainly took that to heart; it defined her approach to ministry. Niebuhr collected art; Liz credits her with instilling in her a collector's impulse.

Hulda Niebuhr was committed to developing what she called "spiritual progenitors." She contrasted them to more nominal believers for whom "Christianity described their identity but not their practice."

(<https://www.geni.com/people/Hulda-Niebuhr/4762384428360030661>)

Liz was a *spiritual progenitor*. For 27 years in campus ministry at the University of Minnesota, she mentored and taught and loved thousands of students. And for ten years here at Westminster she did the same for this congregation. She "*progenerated*."

Everywhere she served, Liz concerned herself with the *practice* of the faith, and in so doing, the sharing of the gospel. She taught us the love and justice of the gospel.

That's why the story of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples was so central to her theology. Here was the Lord of Life, the Word made flesh, taking on the humble task of a servant, cleaning the dust off the weary feet of those in the room that night.

That act embodied for Liz the way this faith of ours is supposed to play out in real life. *To love one another*, as Jesus commands, we have to get up from the table and get down on the floor with a bowl of water and a towel and *love the other*.

Kathleen Norris writes, “

“My favorite definition of heaven comes from a Benedictine sister, who told me that as her mother lay dying in a hospital bed she had ventured to reassure her by saying, ‘In heaven, everyone we love is there.’ The older woman had replied, ‘No, in heaven I will love everyone who’s there.” (*Amazing Grace* [New York: Riverhead Books, 1998], p. 367)

That’s a foot washing approach to heaven and to faith and to life. It’s how Liz lived.

Did you notice that all three texts Liz selected for this service mention feet?

“How beautiful upon the mountains,” Isaiah says, “Are the *feet* of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation. (Isaiah 52:7)

“For God will command angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways,” the psalmist says. “On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your *foot* against a stone.” (Psalm 91:11-12)

I don't think these references to feet in these texts – whether those being washed, or bearing good news, or being protected from sharp stones – are merely coincidental. Liz had those very large feet. My family does, as well. We talked about large feet once. She let on that she had made peace with them, and, in fact, was rather pleased with them. They kept her well-balanced in life. She appreciated the stability they offered. They carried her all over the world. They helped her stand in the pulpit. And those feet pointed her in the direction of biblical texts that proved meaningful in the practice of her faith.

It does take a village to raise a child; in Liz's case, it took a village to journey with her to her death. In my 35 years of ministry I can't recall a more graciously prolonged end of life than that which Liz experienced. So many people participated in those final weeks and months.

She received old friends, family members, a group of singers from the Westminster Choir, other musicians from our church, pastors, children, and many, many others. A virtual parade to her bedside. When you arrived at the facility, all you had to say, was "Liz" and they knew where to direct you. And if you simply said, "Mother of God," they pointed upstairs.

One of those who visited her toward the end of her life was a ninth grader who will be in confirmation class this fall. She had wanted Liz to be her mentor through the class. Realizing that would not happen, the student visited Liz and asked what advice she might have for her as she starts confirmation. "Be happy," Liz

said. "Work hard, have fun, and remember that God always loves you."

It turns out that confirmation student will be mentored by Liz after all, working from heaven above.

The last time I saw Liz she looked me in the eye after I greeted her and said, "You know I'm dying."

I told her I did know that.

"It's awful," she said, and then added with a smile, "And awesome."

Life is like that. Liz knew her share of sorrow along the way. But at the end she could look back – and so can we – and affirm that the awesomeness far outweighs anything else. *That's how God's love is, in this life and in the next.*

Thanks be to God for the life of Liz Downing Heller.

Thanks be to God for a love that cannot be taken from us.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.