



St. John's
EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COLD SPRING HARBOR

Sermons from St. John's: Funeral Homily for Mary Lenore Blair
The Very Rev. Gideon L. K. Pollach
Saturday, November 16, 2024

O God of grace and glory, we remember before you this day our sister Mary Lenore. We thank you for giving her to us, his family and friends, to know and to love as a companion on our earthly pilgrimage. In your boundless compassion, console us who mourn. Give us faith to see in death the gate of eternal life, so that in quiet confidence we may continue our course on earth, until, by your call, we are reunited with ML and those who have gone before; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.* (BCP, pg. 493)

Friends, I don't know what to say. I have been struggling to write this homily for a long time, and for many reasons. It's not just that I am work-avoidant, I promise. I just didn't want to.

I didn't want to admit that Mary Lenore has died. I don't want to try to summarize the gift of her life. I don't want to simplify her complex life to one thing or another, for fear of minimizing the complexities of who Mary Lenore is to us all. I know that Mary Lenore was many amazing things, and I know that have only known her for the last 9 years, and that you all have known her for much longer.

I never got to see her play tennis, but I know that she was great at it and that it was important to her. I once tried to count the number of times her name appeared on the beach club walls, but Inrsn out of fingers, toes and time.

I didn't get to see her ski, but she told me how much she missed her trips to Val d'Isere most recently. As a former State Department employee, I can easily recognize that life and career were amazing- and I wished I had known her then, too. Her family tell me how she loved them- and that she was a blessing to them. She was a blessing to us too.

I was honored to be an honorary member of the League of Handsome Gentlemen, and I am honored to be preacher for her today.

I had hoped to help her in her garden, but we never got around to it. Looking back, I'm not sure I even got to hear her play the piano - I mean really play it other than at her unforgettable Christmas parties - and to which we will come back to in a moment.

But, I did know her. She gave us all the gift of her friendship. And she gave me the honor of sharing her questions about god and faith- - and that is rare - even for a priest.

And before we go any further, some thank you's. First, Marilyn, Thomas, and Mary Jo, thank you for the moving remembrances. They were so touching and beautiful. To her team of caregivers, on behalf of all of us who loved Mary Lenore as you did, thank you for taking such great care of her.

You gave ML the great gift of being at home until she died. At home, she could listen to music. At home, she could welcome guests with dignity. At home, she could greet, or at least see, her beloved wild deer that came into her yard. The same deer that she used to toast with a glass of wine in the evenings. The same deer that ate from her garden stealing produce that would otherwise be delivered to the Helping Hands Rescue Mission. Her home was an extension of her welcoming spirit, and she loved it. So, thank you for helping her remain there.

David Brooks the celebrated New York Times columnist, has written a lot about what he calls “weavers.” Weavers, in his use, are the heroes in our midst who purposefully weave together the social fabric of community. Frequently Brooks will celebrate them in his columns by spotlighting their ministry. Often, the weavers he lifts up are leaders of non-profits or community organizations. People whose professional lives are given over to this vital task of ensuring that we are all connected to each other.

Mary Lenore was a weaver. Her work as a weaver may have been unknown to Brooks, but that work in our community has been vital, and was completed with grace. Her home was the place where our lives were knit together into deeper relationships, just as our voices were knit together around her piano at her Christmas party. Strangers became friends there. She seemed to know everyone, and she shared her friends generously. She wanted us all to know each other. She wanted us to be friends because she valued us so dearly. And she created the space and the atmosphere to make that happen.

In her home you might find yourself talking about genetics with Jim Watson or fish behaviors with a different laureate at the Dorcas Cumming lecture after party that ML and Terry hosted together for so many years. Or the conversation could be a critique of Lombardi’s interpretation of Mimi at the Met or Leif Ove Andsnes’ Grieg or Peter Orth’s Bach and Chopin. There were minor skirmishes over whether Myrrh was mine or John Stevenson’s, the fight over which was bitter perfume bringing a sense of gathering gloom at Christmas. If you talked about the weather, it wasn’t ever a casual conversation. It was more likely a conversation with great specificity about climate and the future of carbon capture. Her gatherings were more Salon, than party. They had an electric sense of possibility, the possibility of discovery. The discovery of a new friend, a new idea, or a new sound. Special thanks here, of course, to Blake and Lenore and all those who helped to organize the last musicale at her home this fall with Jay and Molly Unger - made perfect by their haunting Ashokan Farewell. If you were there, it felt like a farewell to a whole era. And, of course, there was Santa Claus- I think I saw him arrive today in disguise as Frank O’Keefe. Thank you Santa, as always, for making time to be with us in this, your busiest season.

But let’s talk about something less well known which was Mary Lenore’s deep faith.

Mary Lenore was not casual about her faith. She grew up in a household where her two parents did not share the same faith tradition. Her mother was Roman catholic. Her father was an Episcopalian. Each was deeply committed to their faith tradition and skeptical of the others'. The confusion that their conflict around faith generated in Mary Lenore's spirit lasted her whole life. She simply wanted to know God and love and honor both of her parents. And for someone who liked to think deeply about everything, that was painful.

But, like many, many of us privileged to live in this part of the world Mary Lenore found God unambiguously and consistently present in the beauty, creativity, and majesty of the natural world. The God that she knew and saw in creation showed her that the nature of God is Love, Joy, Evolving Creativity, and Emerging Fruitfulness. She knew that nature always finds a way as a sign of God and god's good purpose, which always will find a way to grow, thrive, and live.

I trust that, now that Mary Lenore is in the full and living presence of the God of creation, the god of the Bible, the same god revealed in Jesus and worshipped in differing faith traditions in different and sometimes conflicting ways, I know that she knows without any question that God is love. And that God loves her.

The letter of John tells us that there is no fear in love. It tells us that perfect love casts out fear. Friends, let there be no doubt today for any of you with similar questions that God is love. God's love unites us. God's love invites us to lay down our burdens and find rest for our souls.

Mary Lenore knew love. She showed love to all of us. She was an agent and a companion to love. She was one of Love's great ambassadors.

It was a high privilege to encourage Mary Lenore to trust the fullness of God's love for her and to receive that love both in life and in the sacraments of God's church. And I was honored to share some of those sacraments with her. ML was washed in baptism, she was recently fed by the Eucharist, and she was anointed with the fullness of God's grace. So, now, we entrust her to the God who has loved her whole life and whose love flowed through her to us and countless others.

There is no question that we will all miss ML. We will miss her presence back there here week by week. We will miss her at Christmas. We will miss her for a long time. And we will miss her regularly. This community, not just our church, is impoverished by her loss.

If we can take a measure of her love with us today and share it with others in her name and in her spirit she remains alive in us. If we can take a measure of her courageous willingness to think deeply and critically as she did, our lives will be improved, and our faith strengthened. But friends have no doubts about this God is love.

Those who know God know love. And those who know love know God. Maybe not God as revealed in Jesus, but they know the heart of God.

One of the signs of God's love is the gift of friends, like ML. One the great gifts of God's love is the promise that God comes to us when we die and take us home to Godself.

We are loved into life. We are redeemed by the love of Christ. We are held by love in our death. And our grief is the price we pay for having loved ML. I will gladly grieve for the incredible gift and blessing of ML's friendship. But, I sure will miss her.

We seem to give her back to you, dear God, who gave her to us. Yet as You did not lose her in giving, so we have not lost her by her return. Not as the world gives, do you give, O Lover of Souls! What you give, you take not away. For what is yours is ours always, when we are yours. Life is eternal, and love is immortal, and death is only a horizon, and a horizon is nothing save the limit of our sight. So lift us up, strong Son of God, that we may see further; cleanse our eyes that we may see more clearly; draw us closer to you that we may know ourselves nearer to our beloved who is with you. And while you prepare a place for us, prepare us for that happy place, that where they are, and you are, we too may be, through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*