

These Things Shall Remain
A Sermon on 1 Corinthians 13 by the Rev. Philip Major
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ November 3, 2024

Today we celebrate individuals in our lives who help us know and follow God's ways of love and forgiveness. In a few minutes I'll invite you to come to the front of the Nave, light a candle, and remember a person who helps you know and follow God's ways. For many of us, the person we remember today is a person who has died. Yet there is some part of them that remains with us.

You may find that it is only after they die that you come to understand the meaning and power of their life. This was what I experienced after my mother died. It was only after she died that I came to understand the meaning and power of her life.

Her name was Flora. Flora grew up in southwestern Wisconsin, the eldest of four children. Flora's parents were dairy farmers, so there were always many chores to be done. As is true for many of you, Flora was the one her parents could count on to help get the job done. Her dad taught her how to drive a tractor when she was thirteen, and it wasn't one of those little tractors, it was a full-size farm tractor.

As is true for many of you, Flora loved music and was interested in learning as much as she could. Flora began to take piano lessons when she was eight. By the time she was fourteen, Flora was playing the organ for church services at the Methodist Church in Belmont, where her family went to church. To no one's surprise, Flora ended up being the valedictorian and was elected president of her high school class. As would be the case with many of you, my mother never actually told me any of these things about herself. I heard most of these stories from her brother and sisters, mostly in the years after her death.

Flora met my father, Gordon, at her 20th birthday party. My father was seventeen and had just arrived as a student at the University of Dubuque in Iowa. For the next forty years Flora and Gordon were partners and supported each other in their work.

As is true for many of you, their work was not the kind you would describe as 'easy'. During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s Flora and Gordon were leading a church in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Cleveland, Ohio. It was St. Philip's Church. They worked alongside the people of the neighborhood, seeking to overturn laws that enforced segregation and restricted the civil rights of people of color. Flora and Gordon were on the picket lines, often with my little brother in a baby stroller. One of their colleagues was killed in one of these civil rights demonstrations, but they didn't give up.

As is true for many of you, Flora and Gordon were passionate about building community, inviting people to come together in healthy relationships and service to their neighbors. Thanks to the hard work of hundreds of people, St. Philip's became a center of support for people in the neighborhood. The church ran a nursery school, a thrift shop, literacy programs for adults, summer and after school programs to help children succeed in school, and faith-based programs for people of all ages. When the Vista Volunteer program was started in 1965, a group of college aged young adults came to St. Philip's each summer to serve as volunteers in these programs.

As is true for many of you, Flora and Gordon lived in the neighborhood with the people they were serving. For several years they and their children lived in a low-income apartment, right alongside the members of their church. When they moved into a house a few blocks away from the church, Flora and Gordon offered a bedroom in their home for some of the Vista Volunteers, but of course, Flora was the one who put clean sheets on the beds and clean towels on the dresser before the volunteers arrived.

As is true for many of you, Flora sometimes had to juggle several responsibilities at the same time. Flora worked as an executive assistant at the church organization that coordinated the efforts of Protestant parishes across the city of Cleveland. If she had been born in 1953 instead of 1933, I think Flora might have been the executive director, not the executive assistant. Flora organized and led a children's choir. She took care of her three children and did most of the cooking and cleaning around the

house. Though there were five people in our family, there were many nights when there were eight or ten or twelve people eating dinner at our dining room table.

As is true for many of you, over the course of her life, Flora found many different ways to serve God's people. She was an elementary school teacher. She served as a music teacher for over twenty years, sharing her love of music with thousands of children in Norwalk, Connecticut. Flora was not a person anyone would describe as 'bossy', but over the years she was elected as Dean of her chapter of the American Guild of Organists, and as president of the local chapter of the League of Women Voters. Flora understood that to be a leader means to serve others. She delivered Meals on Wheels. She drove other people to their medical appointments until just a few months before she died. She served as a church organist and choir director for most of the last seven decades of her life. She was an active leader of various local and national church music organizations. When her denomination, the United Church of Christ, introduced its new hymnal in 1995, Flora was responsible for introducing the new hymnal to UCC congregation across Southeastern Connecticut.

As is true for all of us, Flora was not perfect. Flora made plenty of mistakes in her life, just like all of these people we remember today, the ones we refer to as saints. But, as is true for all of you, in the end, the mistakes she made were not nearly as important as the goodness and love Flora brought to the people around her.

When my mom retired from her full-time work as a teacher at the age of 71, I was proud of her for all she had accomplished. I thought I had a pretty good picture of her life. But I didn't really know, I didn't really understand, not until after she died, thirteen years later.

When Flora died, we held her funeral in a large church near her home. It was a good thing we chose one of the largest church buildings in Fairfield County because many more people came to her service than I expected. When the service was over, my brother, my sister and I stood in a line for two hours greeting her friends and former colleagues and students, and listening to their stories. That was when I began to understand the meaning of her life.

As is true for all of you, God gave Flora gifts that were in some way, beyond her comprehension and beyond our comprehension. Flora's gifts were gifts of intelligence, faithfulness, grace, and love. You and I think we understand the meanings of ideas like intelligence, faithfulness, grace, and love. We don't. We are learning about them, but we don't really understand them. To borrow an expression from our Sudanese members, these are 'God gifts'. These are characteristics of God.

God is faithful to us. God is the one who is intelligent; we often behave as if we are not intelligent. God is grace. God is love. God creates us in God's image. God gives us some of God's own characteristics, like the ability to love and the ability to forgive.

We are trying to understand these ideas. We are practicing these ways of being in the world. We are supporting one another as we practice and learn. These ways of being in the world are different than the ways people often choose, so we have to practice and support one another in being faithful, in acting with intelligence, in letting love and grace be in the center of our lives. That is why we are here today.

In his letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul explains that other parts of our lives will come to an end, but the gifts of faith, hope and love abide with us. They never come to an end. When Flora died, I was fearful I would lose her example of faithfulness, grace and love. But I was wrong about that too. Most of the other parts of her life might be fading away, but Flora's example of faithfulness, grace and love remain.

The same thing is true for you and for me in our lives. In the first week of November, 2024, our nation and our world seems precariously balanced on the edge of chaos, division, violence and domination by those who seek power, not to serve others, but to serve themselves. But no matter what happens in the world this week, the most important things in your life and in our lives as a community shall remain.

No matter what happens this week, we will continue to learn the ways of God's grace and love as they have been revealed to us in the teachings and life of Christ Jesus. We will strive to be faithful to

God and to one another, as God is faithful to us. We will nurture relationships of wholeness, trust, and belonging in our church, among our friends, and in our families. We will strive to be a community that practices forgiveness and faithfulness. No matter what happens this coming week, these things shall remain.