



Simple Gifts

Words to Inspire the Spirit

IMMANUEL CHURCH-ON-THE-HILL

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In Tribute to a Cousin

By The Rev. J. Randolph Alexander, Jr.

Like many churches, certainly like most Episcopal churches, we at Immanuel personalize the Prayers of the People. We make them our own by adding the prayers that are on our hearts, whether they are printed in the bulletin, or spoken aloud by us, or simply named silently to God. That's what's supposed to happen with the Prayers of the People. We name those who are sick, the victims of disasters, and the needs of our nation, the Church, and the world. And we name those who have died.

One of those names in our prayers recently was that of my cousin, Connie. Connie and I basically grew up together. She and her family lived close by, and we spent Christmases and birthdays together, as well as many a Sunday afternoon.

Connie was two years older, which meant she always thought she was so very much wiser than I. She could also run faster. She would regularly steal a favorite toy of mine, just to make me try to catch her as she would run circles around me and taunt me. I once hid around a corner with a broom

handle and, being the little strategist, walloped her with the broom as she flew by. (I got in some trouble for that one). We once even had a tricycle accident where her front tooth made an imprint on my forehead.

I usually spent a week or two on their family's farm in the summer, where I would help Connie get the cows for milking and help with the hay baling and with weeding the tobacco. For a time, my uncle, her father, also owned and ran a country store, so I was behind the cash register on occasion, as well. I even played the piano for her wedding.

As we got older, we, of course, saw each other less and less. Yet it was always good to catch up on the phone and laugh. Connie had one of those infectious, deep belly laughs, the kind that could cheer you up in spite of yourself.

Connie told me about a year and a half ago that she needed a liver transplant. This followed years of struggle with, and complications from, her diabetes. Yet Connie had many other physical challenges, and she never received that liver transplant. She died in August.

I last saw Connie in April, and I was struck profoundly by her faith. She had long nurtured a real relationship with Jesus, a real love for Jesus. Even in the midst of her great suffering, she was able to speak of home, and meaning, and purpose. She told me that, whatever happened, she was still a winner. She knew where she was headed; to be with the God who loves her.

I can't believe she's gone. I know we lose more and more people we love as we go through our lives. But still, it's awful. There's no way to sugarcoat it.

Yet, we as Christians can take great comfort in the thought that those we love and have lost are now home. Along with so many others, Connie is now learning the secrets of the universe in the very presence of the Lord of the universe, in the seat of all love and beauty, meaning and purpose, identity and peace. She really did believe she was a winner, so I and all who knew and loved her now must hold on to that, as well.

Moments like these remind us of why this faith we practice is so very important. Well beyond buildings and budgets, staffing and liturgies (all of which are important!), we are asking the deepest questions, the most

important questions: Why are we here? What does all of this mean? How do we live and grow and trust in God even while experiencing these losses? And we are asking them *together*, in community. Thank God for that.

We are blessed in this life when we get glimpses of the next life. *The Book of Common Prayer* speaks of the Eucharist as giving us “a foretaste of your Heavenly banquet” (page 498, Burial II). I believe to my core that Connie is now enjoying that banquet. Thank God for her faith, and for her witness. May she rest in peace and rise in glory.

"But, as it is written, 'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him'" 1 Corinthians 2:9.