

Sermon - Memorial Service for Synod Minister Rev. Naomi Mahler

Friday, November 3, 2023

Bishop Dee Pederson, Southwestern Minnesota Synod, ELCA

Gospel – Mark 4:35-41

³⁵ On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” ³⁶ And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. ³⁷ A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. ³⁸ But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion, and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” ³⁹ And waking up, he rebuked the wind and said to the sea, “Be silent! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. ⁴⁰ He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” ⁴¹ And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

So you’re floating along in your boat on smooth waters, and life seems pretty awesome. Yes, there are new charts to course, new challenges, but most days, maybe you could sing along with “*What a wonderful world.*” And if you were like Naomi, you would sing it with an angel voice.

And then a storm hits. At first, it doesn’t seem so bad. You can handle this. Everybody keep rowing, keep on singing, keep on going. But suddenly, things are out of control. The wind is blowing harder than anything you’ve ever gone through. No, you can’t be perishing! Just – NO!

“Out of control.” That’s what caught Naomi’s attention in this story of Jesus & the disciples in their boat, on the lake, caught-up in a storm, that seemed to come out of nowhere. One day, she was doing all the regular stuff of daily life, spending time with family & friends, working, and then a storm of doctor appointments, tests, and physical illness suddenly hit. It must have seemed like a typhoon!

And yet, Naomi’s own Caring Bridge reflections reveal so well the woman of strength & courage & humor & faith that Naomi has been to US – her family, friends, parishioners, and colleagues – the person we love.

Naomi had not posted on Caring Bridge since 2017. Hallelujah, right?! But then on August 9th, she notified everyone that the cancer had returned. Todd & Grace & Sofia: thank you for your strength to provide updates during that turbulent time. On Sept. 4, all 4 of you collaborated to say Naomi would begin Hospice care at home. You said:

Naomi is at peace with this decision, and she is not afraid. Her faith in God, which has always guided her, filled her with love & joy to receive and to give, and has sustained and shaped her through life, and is now giving her its fullest measure of comfort when it is most needed.

On Sept. 12 Naomi herself posted:

Thought it might be good for you to hear from me! I think a lot of folks worry I am on death's door when we share that I have entered Hospice - but not yet! You don't get to get rid of me that easily! Hospice is to help me live while dying, but it doesn't mean I am immediately dying. It is to help me have a better quality of life while I am facing the end. Life is good, life is hard. I am grateful for what God has given me.

On Sept. 16, Naomi blessed us with her reflection, Dogs & heaven:

Will Rogers is quoted to have said, "If there are no dogs in heaven, I want to go where they ARE!" Naomi here and I agree! Although, I believe that dogs will be in heaven. Psalm 150

says "Let every living, breathing creature praise God! Hallelujah!" If you know me at all, you know how much I love my dogs.

She shared wonderful photos of Chester & Lola - both glued to her - and reminded us that “dog” spelled backwards is “GOD.” Dogs – embodying unconditional love. She wrote:

As for wondering about Heaven, we've been doing a lot of that lately. I don't doubt there is a heaven, I'm just curious what it will be like. The Bible says some things about heaven, but we really don't know what it will be like. However, I believe heaven is a place where all things are being made new; where all people are welcomed; where all of creation will be restored.

Some days, right now, I am feeling sad and angry that I will have to leave this earth at a time that feels too soon.....I bring you my questions, I have no answers, except that I am grateful for my little slice of heaven here on earth for now and I trust in God's promises for the future whatever that ends up looking like. So keep on sharing a glimpse of heaven - forgiving one another, loving & accepting, and working toward restoration for all things & all people. Till next time...

Next time – the last posting Naomi wrote herself – was on Oct. 3:

I think I'm really learning more than ever, that just taking things one day at a time is about all one can do. Speculating about the future, wondering about how things will be - will not get me too far. It won't change the future and I really can't know what the future holds. So just taking it all in the moment is really what is helpful.

Throughout this brief time – less than 3 months!! – Naomi has been for us the woman she has always been – one of inspiration, energy, joy, profound “wisdom & graciousness” [“Sofia” & “Grace”], authenticity, and deep faith.

Which is why the reason for being here today just seems so wrong. Todd, Grace, Sofia, LaNell – we cannot begin to know the depth of sadness and loss that you have been, are, and will experience.

- Todd, to lose your amazing spouse after just 26 years – your heart breaks for the love of your life.
- Sofia & Grace – Girls are supposed to have their mommas around to celebrate the big milestones and the little moments of all that are ahead for you. This is so not right.
- LaNell – for a parent to have to have a memorial for their child... no matter how old they are... And for a Rachel & Matthew, for Rita and for all of you siblings through marriage, and for aunts & uncles and nieces & nephews.... this is not the way things are supposed to be!
- All of you from Naomi’s congregations, her friends, so many colleagues... we just can’t wrap our heads around how quickly our lives changed at her illness and now her passing. And all of us are so GRATEFUL for the time – short or long – when our paths not only “crossed” – but came together.

For the Synod staff, Naomi was with us for our last in-person meeting in Redwood Falls on Wednesday, August 2. The following week, she joined in by Zoom, and informed us of her diagnosis; and then – the time was just too short. So now, a few reflections from her staff colleagues:

- *Naomi genuinely wanted to know me as a person. She had the ability to laugh at herself, so lighthearted, but you also got a sense from her that she knew the ups and downs of life..... I keep thinking about her family, so much time was robbed.*

Her ability to love generously was evident. She was someone who loved with ease but also could accept love and caring from others. Maybe the two go hand in hand.... My life is better having known her.

I was struck by her insight, her smile, her welcome.....her deep love of her family and her dogs.... I will miss her laughter. I will miss calling her. There's a joke that introverts make friends when an extrovert befriends them.... Indeed, Naomi did that for me.

She had made peace w/ her breast cancer. And part of that peace grew from her faith....She could also ask what needed to be done to make something happen; and she made it happen. Naomi brought energy, spark, and enthusiasm to any meeting or conversation. She was genuinely who she is all the time. Of course, I often ask, What would Jesus Do? But now I also sometimes wonder, "WW Naomi Do?"

And from her friend, "Team Naomi" leading the music today: *"One of Pastor Naomi's strengths was to draw people together. Once again, she is at work. Here we are, people from all walks of life, many who have never met, sharing our deep love and deep admiration for a friend we have in common through music."*

Drawing people together is a gift our Naomi, like the Naomi Scripture, brought to ALL of her relationships from:

- Luther College, Nordic; Seminary; Youth Ministry;
- serving w/ Todd in ELCA Global Mission in Costa Rica;
- receiving the call to Paz; working for the LINK, Green Lake Lutheran Ministries, Calvary;
- Call Committees & Rostered Ministers, equipping congregations; and
- she been planning to be in South Africa – right NOW!! - meeting new friends in the ELC's South Eastern Diocese there.

Todd, Grace, & Sofia, thank you for reflecting on Naomi's life with the words you have just spoken and had written: "Naomi felt, lived, and shared God's love, mercy, and grace for all. She worked passionately for cross-cultural and interracial understanding, as well as collaboration with other Christian denominations and religious faiths."

That was true because Jesus' love for her - and God's vision for the world - had grasped her. And THAT power was far greater than any barrier, hostility, exhaustion, suffering, or illness that might have come into her life like a storm. So - Naomi could not abide platitudes, cheap theology, or some of the things we say to others, intending to comfort. Statements like:

- "God must have a plan for this; you just can't see it yet...."
- "God doesn't give you more than you can handle..."
- "If you just had enough faith...."

Naomi couldn't abide statements like that, nor did she speak them to others. Naomi knew that some things are just wrong:

- suffering, hunger, injustice, racism
- selfish gain, power over others, violence, cancer.

The Jesus she followed and preached, and that we proclaim today did not – did NOT! in his ministry go around giving people leprosy or disease, drawing lines that made some insiders and others outsiders, or perpetuating systems of inequity. Jesus....

- spoke words of mercy & compassion, forgiveness & freedom;

- called disciples to get into the boat and go to the other side;
- multiplied what seemed to others to be only scarcity; and
- stretched out his arm to welcome and to heal and make alive.

And if you want to see the heart of God:

- look at Jesus on the cross and see both the foolishness and the wisdom of God – as Jesus surrendered himself to the very worst that human systems could do to others as he was betrayed, denied, and suffered – and show how far God’s love will go to overcome sin & death; and
- look at the empty grave to see God’s intention to fill all things and all people with LIFE - the LIFE for which we pray every week, “*Your kingdom come, YOUR WILL BE DONE ON EARTH as in heaven.*”

TODAY, we know that human life is precious and fragile. And when the very best of medical science is not able to repair these vulnerable bodies, when our arms can no longer hold-onto those we love, we believe that God not only weeps with us, but holds us fast in that realm where God’s reign comes in all its fullness, where *all people are gathered together, and God will wipe every tear from our eyes, and death will be no more, neither will there be mourning, nor crying, no pain anymore, for the former things will have passed away and God will make all things new.*” (Rev. 21)

Those promises came to Naomi when she was welcomed into God’s family in Holy Baptism, sealed by the Holy Spirit, marked with the cross + of Christ forever, and joined to Christ’s death & resurrection; and there is nothing in life or in death that could ever take those promises from her.

- In her ministry, Naomi traced that cross + on hundreds of foreheads as they were baptized.
- In Ash Wednesday worships, she traced that + cross on the foreheads of thousands, along with the words, “*Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.*” And every minister who speaks those words, does so with the remembrance of our own baptism and our own mortality! Because we know that one day those words will be spoken at our graveside when someone else commends us finally with those words, “*earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.*”
- But we speak those words, we all hear those words, only AFTER, after this promise has been declared: “*In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend.....*”

Right now, we recognize that life here, life at your home, life in the church, will never be quite the same again without Naomi’s presence. As we celebrate All Saints this week – in this beautiful worship space we recognize that yet one more name has joined that great cloud of witnesses that surrounds us. That one is named “Naomi.”

And in the meantime, dear friends, Jesus calls you & me to take our grief born of love, and use it for the transformation of this world:

- grateful for every moment and fully present;
- forgiving one another, loving and accepting, working for restoration for all things and all people; and
- knowing that when the storm seems out of control, you are not alone. A community of love surrounds you, Jesus is present, and Jesus speaks to your heart, “*Peace!*”