

Homily for Joyce McFarland
Saturday, June 18, 2022, 2:00 pm
Rev. Devon Anderson

It was Easter morning at Trinity Church in Excelsior, about 8 or 9 years ago. We had just finished serving communion when there was a loud “POP” and all of the electricity cut out. We would learn later of a small explosion at the nearby power plant that left most of the west metro without power. Easter morning is a big draw at Trinity and several hundred of us sat in relative darkness as we finished the service the best we could, and then ushered each other out of the building hoping to prevent injuries. The hour before the next service was a whirl of activity – as the staff and I ran through the building, snagging every lantern, candle, and flashlight we could find to light the sanctuary before hundreds of people streamed in through the front doors.

I realized in the flurry that the pulpit would also be without light – and so to deliver that big Easter sermon I brought my phone with me so I could use its flashlight. I was just about to make the sermon’s big, fabulous point when the phone suddenly began to shake and ring.

Someone was calling me. “Who could this *possibly* be?” I asked the congregation. It was Joyce McFarland.

She had returned home after the early service, only to remember that she had forgotten to tell me something important and thought to leave a message so she wouldn’t forget.

In the days after Joyce’s stroke, I spoke with countless parishioners and people from her vast network of friends and admirers in the wider church. And in virtually every conversation, there was this theme.... “Joyce called me...”

“What makes me so incredibly sad,” said Joyce’s dear friend Denise Reilly, “is that Joyce called me right before her stroke. We had dinner scheduled for this week.”

“Joyce called me,” our State Representative Kelly Morrison told me over coffee at the Excelsior Dunn Brothers, “She said a candidate for office had come to the house and told her that she was ‘endorsed by Kelly Morrison.’ ‘I needed to hear it from your own lips,’ Joyce told me.”

“Joyce called me.” Story after story after story. Literal phone calling but spiritual calling, too. That’s what Joyce did – *she called people*. Called us to be our better selves, or to face into something that was hard, or to take a risk, or to try something new, or consider new truth, or to

strike out on a new venture. If Joyce saw a need, she'd think of someone in her life that could minister to it – and she'd call you up. “I saw this...” she'd say. Or “I wonder if we might...” Or “Have you ever thought about...” And then, more often than not, if you were up for the call, she'd find a way to offer some resources, too, to help you answer that call. “Giving money away makes me very happy,” she said to me on more than one occasion. *And she was happy a lot.* I look around this illustrative cathedral and see so many of you – community leaders, political figures, captains of industry, innovators, activists, health care providers, fellow parishioners, family, dear friends – and wonder if there is a soul here that Joyce didn't call (or call out or call up) at one time or another. And I wonder if there is a person here for whom that call didn't make a difference or even changed the course of your life.

One of our readings today comes from Luke's Gospel – the story of Jesus calling his first disciples. I love how Jesus takes the time to connect with the men first before they leave their lives behind and follow him. I love how Jesus connected first by giving them some encouragement and fishing pointers – offering a taste of connection, an experience of love. One of the things that made Jesus divine was his unparalleled capacity for relationship. Jesus saw people, listened to people. This passage was chosen intentionally, of course. Joyce's capacity to call us out – into fuller life, deeper understanding, greater love, more compassionate engagement with our neighbors – was her particular charism, the way she most faithfully lived into her Christianity.

Joyce was not Jesus and not a saint. Just like each one of us she was vulnerable to the entire range of human feelings and emotions – sometimes unforgiving, sometimes sharp or insensitive. “Welcome to the human race,” she was fond of saying. It was through her humanity that she called us – built relationship and connection first, maybe gave us a few tips on whatever we were doing, and then called us out, called us up, called us beyond. And then she made it possible for many of us to respond to that call – with guidance, encouragement, connection, or money.

I knew Joyce for almost a decade as my spiritual director before I came to Trinity Excelsior in 2011. In that capacity, she was constantly calling me into new ways of being. I have so many gems written in my journals – golden nuggets she said to me in those sacred meetings that rocked my world, shook my foundation, or made me cry from their tenderness.

Early on I sat in her spiritual direction room at St. David's Minnetonka complaining. Our infant daughter had been diagnosed with a rare form of dwarfism and the list of possible physical and cognitive hardships that went along with that diagnosis was extensive. I was spinning, and I was angry. The location for my anger was my parents – who had disappeared after the diagnosis, focusing their attention on their other grandchild. Joyce waited patiently as

I parsed out my list of grievances. We sat in silence for a moment, she sat up straight, looked me in the eye and said, sternly, “Devon, *comparison is not of God.*” It took me years to unpack that declaration – but, in the end, of course, she was right. We compare when our egos are allowed to run amok, as we feed resentments and jealousies. How unfair it is when someone else receives what we covet: attention, adoration, promotion, accolades. In the almost 20 years since, every time I feel the cold tenacles of jealousy begin to wrap themselves around my insides, I hear Joyce’s voice in my mind’s eye: *comparison is not of God.* In those moments I am reminded of my belovedness: okay as is and created in the image of God, with all the adoration, presence, and attention that we’ll ever need or want from the one who matters the most.

And then there was the presence that Joyce referred to as “the Runt.” Maybe along the way you heard Joyce refer to her “Runt.” It was kind of like those old TV shows where a character would be presented with a dilemma and an angel would appear on one shoulder, and the devil would appear on the other. The devil side Joyce called her “Runt.” There was a hand gesture that went along with it. She’d say, “my Runt is saying this…” or “You might want to avoid what your runt is telling you…” Recently I read that sometimes in the Hebrew Bible the devil is known as *ha Satan*, which translates in English to “the Accuser.” No matter what we believe about the devil or about Satan, whether we believe it to be an actual being, a fallen angel, the human forces of evil, or the shadow side of our own selves, we all know the voice of the Accuser. The voice of shame that matters in our ears, the voice that somehow finds the express lane into our hearts and heads, the voice that identifies that deeply hidden, deeply rooted insecurity and toys with it, amplifies it, multiples it – that is the voice of the Accuser. The voice of attribution directed at us, which tells us that we are the worst thing that we have ever done – that is the voice of the Runt, of the Accuser. The Runt’s is a voice that plays on repeat within us, profoundly different from a guilty conscience, it is shame, through and through. We all, at some level, battle shame. It’s part of the human condition. And when it rears its ugly head in my own life, I close my eyes, and remember Joyce’s finger flicking her shoulder. “I’m not going to listen to the Runt today,” she’d say, casting her gaze instead to her better angels.

I know I’m not the only beneficiary here who holds in my memory gems of wisdom from Joyce – and I hope that you will recall them with each other, and with Dick and Joyce’s family after the service today. They are just too precious, too impactful not to share or lose. Joyce had wisdom, earned over a lifetime. And its greatest gift is in the telling, in the sharing and in so doing we keep her memory alive.

Joyce was many things to many people: mother, wife, grandmother, neighbor, friend, parishioner, spiritual director, philanthropist, confidant, North Shore enthusiast, world traveler, reader, calligrapher, board member. She did so much with the gift of her life – she lived large

and fearlessly and faithfully. The great 13th century mystic Meister Eckhart said: *We should not think that holiness is based on what we do, but rather on what we are, for it is not our works that sanctify us, but who sanctifies our works.* What is most important is not what Joyce did, as impressive as that was, but how she did it. During her life she discovered the rewards of sustained silence. She loved herself a good quote, and she spent hundreds of hours penning them on beautiful, heavy paper and then giving them to people she loved or to students in the classes she taught or conferences she led. Joyce, in the words of Howard Thurman, “look(ed) at the world with quiet eyes.” We suffer her death with the full knowledge of what a remarkable, courageous, complicated, inspiring person she was. But as we say in our worship, “even at the grave we make our song, Alleluia!” We both grieve and celebrate today – for surely the gates of heaven opened wide for Joyce.

Dick, there is no bottom to the well of love we feel for you, for your family, and for Joyce. And today we raise our voices in thanksgiving – for all that she gave, taught, and lived. Amen.

Source:

The piece about the “Accuser” is quoted from: *Wholehearted Faith* by Rachel Held Evans, p. 94.