

With Thanksgiving for the Life
of Ruth Annette Lindstrom
June 1, 1922 + February 1, 2018
Philippians 1:18b-25

I'll admit I've been on kind of a Philippians kick.

We had it for readings here in worship last month, and I just really, really love this part of the Bible, for what it says about our lives and about what we're up to here together. We'd also done some Bible study sessions on it, and Lindy didn't come to those. But that made me recall how she *had* come for some Bible study back in January (because it happened to be a gap in her schedule and she was in the neighborhood), but she ended up missing the rest of the sessions because she was down in Rockford, with her mom for those last weeks of life, and with her dog Auggie, and with all the others who lived in the same care facility, and Bob's practice of seeing her every day to sing together and family and all those relationships. And that loving assemblage, being together in compassion and joy even through the hard times, that's kind of a model of Philippians, too.

So we're going with Philippians today.

I picked this reading because I'll say again that Philippians is really a love letter, an outpouring of how good it is to be together, joyful and enjoying each other, to share life, to share love.

In the first case, that's about the writer of the letter, Paul, and a congregation he's away from.

But that's also some of what we heard in what the family had to share about Annette, or Yaya in that term of endearment, with stories of so much laughter and creativity together and adventures and the harmonies of music that should've been recorded and all the memories of good times shared and that deep, rich sense of connection. Those words weren't just eulogy; they were a love letter, a love letter capturing life, but a love letter because of separation, since we don't have the chance to tell Annette directly today.

This recalling of past happiness makes me think about a phrase that has come to be used quite a lot for portraying these sorts of gatherings.

It's popular now to refer to these or even to request them as "celebrations of life."

Now, I have to say that I'm not quite sure what that's standing in contrast to. Would the alternative to a "celebration of life" be a "disparagement of life?" Or a gathering of complaints and sharing of resentments? If so, I've certainly never led a funeral service that would fit those labels, and wouldn't say that I've been to one, either.

I suppose two other alternatives are that a celebration of life means that we're taking seriously the life the person lived, a memorial service full of memories, that we're actually recollecting Annette and paying attention to who she was as opposed to some generic set of churchy words. Maybe there's a sense that a funeral could be impersonal otherwise.

Or maybe it's the notion that otherwise we end up focusing on the death, so we celebrate a life we had and shared instead of just gathering to lament a loss. But if that's the case, then I don't really like the term celebration of life, because it seems to overlook the obvious reality.

This is part of what Paul is facing in the letter with the Philippians. It's such an intense love letter exactly because he's separate from them. We cherish the remembrances of Annette today precisely because she's not here to keep sharing them with us, because death has absolutely and matter-of-factly separated her from us.

Even as we gather on a beautiful summer afternoon, on what would've been the day after Annette's 96th birthday, there's some of winter chill that comes creeping back in. This isn't all laughter and joy and the fondness for the past. I know that there's been extra grief this week that has brought back some tears, that even while getting ready for a cheery and vibrant service and keeping humor, still it has meant confronting that loss and separation of death in a renewed way, of having to live back again also into the ending weeks this past winter, and again having to say goodbyes, farewells, the reality of being apart. Even if we're so intent on celebrating life, that can't help but make us face some sorrow that that

life is no longer with us. The best of celebration for such a spunky, creative, friendly woman will also rightly be paired by the lament. If we didn't feel that sorrow, then maybe we'd have to feel there wasn't much of her life worth celebrating!

But, again, Philippians points us toward something more. It isn't only that it was so good to be together, so many times of joy, such deep love. And it's not only that that's been fractured by death, that you can't have what you used to have. Not that a spark and sparkle has gone out. It's not that's over and this is the end.

In this reading, Paul doesn't contrast the joy of life versus the lament of death. Rather, he contrasts two kinds of joy. Or, maybe to put it another way, he has two celebrations of life—a celebration of the life we have known, and a celebration of the life to come, as we'll sing in a lovely Swedish promise, “neither life nor death shall ever from our God her children sever.”

As we talked about it in the Bible study, the best image was a love triangle. It's not just that Annette loved you and you loved Annette. It's also that Jesus loves you and loves Annette. And Annette shared that love of Jesus, that passion and commitment and devotion. Paul recognized that even while a time like this of confronting death meant separation in one relationship—and even if he would've found plenty of joyful reason to want to remain—still he found even more in going to the sweet embrace of Jesus. It's far better, he figured.

And that's what we hold onto today, too. It would've been nice still to have Annette here, to be laughing and playing with her, to be celebrating her life by having a birthday party. Instead we have a re-birthday party and the celebration of new life, of a love that already was holding her through her life and will continue hold onto her forever, and that will welcome you more deeply and directly into it, too, when one day we'll all be brought together again, for a feast without end, cups overflowing with wine, maybe a heavenly choir, angelic Lindy on the autoharp, banjos of Paradise, and Annette making sure the

melody is well-covered. That's really the life we celebrate today. Thanks be to God. Amen