

Funeral homily for Arlin G. Meyer
11 February 2017
Frederick A. Niedner

Psalm 46:1-11

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. ² Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; ³ though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. Selah

⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. ⁵ God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns. ⁶ The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. ⁷ The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah

⁸ Come, behold the works of the LORD; see what desolations he has brought on the earth. ⁹ He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire. ¹⁰ "Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth." ¹¹ The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah

Romans 6:5-11

⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶ We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷ For whoever has died is freed from sin. ⁸ But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹ We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ¹⁰ The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. ¹¹ So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

John 14:1-6

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ² In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴ And you know the way to the place where I am going."

⁵ Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" ⁶ Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Families have conversations that go on practically forever, with themes and refrains that come up every time they're together. The same goes for colleagues who have worked together for decades and cultivated friendships along the way. The family conversation picked up on Tuesday evening at Arlin's and Sharon's home on Chicago Street, when Kent, Colleen, and Matt came for supper and spent the evening. There was news, of course (an old conversation really, despite its name, "news"), and Michigan basketball, and a game of cards with old refrains about the rules, and all the other topics that serve as signs of their family's intimacy and love.

A few of you know that when Arlin, John Feaster, and Buzz Berg retired some years ago and no longer had to go to meetings, they started having their own—weekly breakfast meetings at Round the Clock, and they had more or less the same conversation every week, with a wrinkle or two of "news" to season it. As those of us a tad younger have retired one by one, that breakfast circle has grown some, but the conversation stays the same. These days it's rarely about Updike and DeVries and Hardy and Wordsworth,

and why students don't read any more like we did, but—surprise, surprise!—riffs and variations on the news, weather, and sports, and almost always a few recollections and stories about some of the beloved or more exotic folks we've known and worked with over the years. Unlike Dick Baepler's history of Valparaiso University, the one rehearsed spontaneously each week over breakfast has accounts and details that will never be published, nor should they.

Often in the last couple months, Arlin hadn't been able to come to breakfast, so a few times we've picked up food and gathered for lunch in his living room to continue our long, long conversation. We were set to gather on Wednesday at midday, but as we all know, early Wednesday morning all our long conversations got interrupted, which is why we're here, and why since Wednesday, we've had a different conversation, mostly of story-telling, and giving thanks, which is what we always do, what we have to do, what we get to do, when we hand a beloved, old conversation partner, brother, husband, dad, grandpa, colleague, and friend back to God, who gave him to each of us, as a gift.

The family stories begin, of course, back in Sioux Center, Iowa, among the Dutch Reformed farm families living hand to mouth in those last years of the Great Depression. I've heard only a few—about the home without an indoor toilet, which tempted the boys in the dead of winter to improvise some primitive indoor plumbing, which worked briefly, until Arlin's dad finally noticed curiously colored icicles descending from the ventilation holes in the storm windows of the boys' bedroom.

Folks made their own fun in those days, so while there was lots of work, there were also plenty of games, indoors and out. And every Sunday they all went to church—twice. You've already heard from Mark, and everyone else who remembers Arlin, about his size, and yes, he played basketball and the six-man version of football common among the small high schools of that time and place.

Arlin was headed for a life of farming, and indeed back in Sioux Center he won the annual Weed Seed Recognition competition with his ability to tell a thistle seed from a milkweed seed, and dock from velvetleaf. While Arlin's instincts and expertise at farming help explain Mark's beautiful description of how Arlin cultivated not only the Christ College courtyard, but a whole generation of students and young teachers and scholars, we almost didn't have Arlin as an academic colleague. He aimed to do literal, not figurative farming.

But he finished high school in three years, so he took a "gap year," which he spent living with two maiden aunts, both teachers, both lovers of books and literature, and Arlin got infected, smitten. So, off to college he went—to Dordt College, and Calvin, where he and Sharon met, then master's work at Michigan and doctoral work at Ohio University, where, by the way, Arlin's and Sharon's relationship with Lutherans began, not because of a conversion experience, but because there was no Christian Reformed church in Athens, Ohio. Both there and here, for all these years, they comfortably made their life among us Lutherans, but the deep grooves and tracks on Arlin's soul remained Dutch Reformed.

Despite this academic calling, we still almost never got to know Arlin and Sharon, because Calvin College also wanted him when he was ready to teach, but it seemed a bit too soon to go back where he'd been a student. So Arlin interviewed here, in the middle of that famous January blizzard of 1967 we recently commemorated, which found him stuck in the old Lembke Hotel downtown for several days beyond the interview process, housed in a closet-sized room with a total stranger for a roommate because so many others were also stranded in town.

And so it was that we got to know this giant of a man whose career and contributions Mark has eloquently described, a man so large in students' minds they joked his middle initial "G" stood for God, who claimed he didn't wear a watch because his wrists were too big, who was always a bit too tall for his golf clubs (and his golfing buddies will happily illustrate his stance as he addressed the ball), who played noontime basketball at the Y for many years wearing those old, glued-together glasses, and the only thing more dangerous than the toothpick he always chewed as he played were the sharp elbows with which he protected rebounds, and who excelled until quite recently at swimming-pool volleyball, always playing, obviously, for the side in the deep end.

Mark also described so beautifully the spirit of hospitality that dwelled in Arlin, the spirit that allowed him to make difficult things appear easy, because he would never complain about how much work it was to do all the logistical and detail work that made a weekend of interviews, with six candidates in town at once, proceed smoothly. If you asked how long it took to make it all happen, he practiced that selective hearing Mark mentioned, and changed the subject. Family members, too, describe how he planned out parties in minute detail, and in difficult times or crisis moments in someone's life, Arlin simply hitched up his belt and did what needed doing without complaint or a word of judgment.

Maybe some folks are born with that spirit of hospitality, the spirit that makes difficult things look easy and makes a welcoming place for others, no matter what, but for most of us, we have it only if we die, if we get crucified, with Christ, which begins in the death we die in baptism, and then happens every day after, as each day we also rise to new life by the power of God's gracious, eternally persistent Holy Spirit. Arlin had got crucified with Christ, and you could tell, not just because he, too, had a missing finger, a partly ruined hand like the ones the risen Jesus liked to show people. The Holy Spirit had worked tirelessly on Arlin.

This is the Spirit of Christ, whose familiar words and promise we have heard again today—"I go to prepare a place for you." Jesus, whose name most literally means, "God makes room, makes a place," was more than anything in the hospitality business, and he made hard things look easy, because he never complained, and the places he had to get ready for us weren't only in the heavens somewhere, but right here, in the places where the damage we've done to ourselves finally catches up with us, and among other things, our lungs don't work any more like they should. The crucified one is there with us, in that place of getting nailed, as he is in all the other places Jesus goes in John's version of the

story, like the place of betrayal, where even our heart, which has faithfully served us for so many years, becomes fickle, quits on us.

No one is supposed to die naked, nailed to a post, nor in any of the other awkward, humiliating, and pedestrian ways and places we die, but Jesus has gotten every one of those places ready for us by joining us there. He does this for each of us. No matter where we end up, including places of deep grief and haunting regrets, there he is. He got there first. For this he lived, and for this he died. Without complaint, he got our places ready, so we're never alone. Even in death, we live with him.

Even in death, we live with him, which means that our long, sweet, complicated conversation is interrupted, but it's not over, and the sign of this is that another of our shared experiences is not interrupted. It continues. I speak of our singing. All these songs we're singing here today were Arlin's favorites, and were part of the Meyer siblings' annual summertime gatherings, which always included a hymn-sing.

Whenever we sing the old songs of our faith and hope, all who ever sang them before in every time and place join us. We sing with all the saints. The gospels teach us this by pointing out that Jesus died singing the songs he'd learned from his mom, including the one that began, "My God, My God, why . . .," and also that old bedtime song that contains the line, "Into your hands I lay my spirit, my life."

As today we lay Arlin's life into those very same hands, I'll share with you Arlin's own way of explaining this blessed truth about our singing, something he wrote a few years ago for one of those annual sibling get-togethers:

Although I never learned to play a musical instrument and do not have a great voice, we had a piano in our house growing up and Mom and Henny encouraged us to sing—mostly hymns from the Psalter Hymnal. Just as a side note, I did sing "All Day on the Prairie in the Saddle I Ride" at a musical competition in high school, but I don't recall winning a prize or being asked to sing at other events. Nonetheless, one of my chief joys in attending church is lustily belting out the hymns, many of which I can sing from memory. Singing hymns is so engrained in my memory and my identity that I often find myself singing them when I am engaged in other activities, like mowing the lawn, driving alone in the car, or sitting in the house or in my office. One of the interesting aspects of singing is that you do not have to sing aloud but can just let the words and notes play in your mind. Some of my greatest singing has been accomplished in this fashion although I am the sole beneficiary of these incredible performances. So I am very appreciative of having grown up in a singing household and look forward to a reprisal in heaven where I can join Mom, Dad, and the rest of our family in singing together again.

And so he now has, and so, too, shall we all.