

In Memoriam
Mary Gurley
August 17, 2020

I've thought about this day for longer than you might imagine, only not under these conditions. And this is my first attempt to do anything regarding the Church and pastoral care in months, since the beginning of this damned virus. From the relative safety of my living room I've listened to a variety of preachers over the months describing their experience of preaching to empty pews or, at best, safely distanced congregations. And I would be remiss if I didn't say something about that on a day like this. If you'll remember, for George's funeral we were able to fill this place, and rightly so. He played his part in the life of this congregation and the community of Ada. We lifted him up, offered our thanks, and commended him to God's never-ending care. And, of course, we can do the same for Mary, and we're doing what we can. But to coin one of John Ashby's favorite phrases—"this is kind of the pits." In the old normal, the congregation would be over-flowing, choir would be in full force, in recognition of Mary's abiding presence in it. Past Sunday school youth who are now adults, and some of them very old adults, would be peppered throughout the pews voicing their heartfelt thanks, their appreciation, for fifty years (fifty years!) of thoughtful guidance, biblical scholarship, and supportive friendship. And by the way, Mary's teaching career was ten years longer than Moses wandered in the wilderness! What an accomplishment. St. Margaret's guild would have put on a spread following the service in honor of her leadership within the service corp of women who have given so much of their time, talent, and treasure for well over a hundred years. Without a doubt, no one loved this Church more than Mary. No one. And no one should have been more honored for all that she did and all that she was within this Body of Christ.

Of course, that's what I want. God only knows what she would have wanted, truth be told. I asked Susan about that yesterday morning, and without hesitation she said, "Mary wouldn't care. She's with George now." Even so, in difficult times the church makes do. You're her family and I was her priest for a long time. That ought to count for something.

As a clergy-person I guess I knew her about as well as anyone with a collar. I had to peek into an old text this last week to see if I still had it right, about family systems in the small church, things we learned about in seminary and the people in leadership roles that we would come to identify as having power. These were people that we would want to use, in a good way, to accomplish the purposes of ministry. And so there is that beloved, revered, and sometimes even frightening role known as the Matriarch, the Mother of the parish. There isn't anywhere that I've been that didn't have one—Glynnis Clifford at St. Paul's Cathedral, Jewel Jones at Redeemer, Okmulgee, and Mary Gurley, St. Luke's, Ada.

From the very beginning Mary was always my friend. I credit the Ashby's with making that so. They paved the way for me. I guess I could have screwed that up, but somehow I didn't. The first thing I had to get used to with Mary, was her uncanny ability to materialize without a moment's notice. It was one of her super-powers. I would be in my office and hear the whispered, "Is he in?" And then "hoo-hoo! Hi pal, do you have a minute?" Which never meant a minute, at which point she would pull out her list. And I don't mean that figuratively, she

would have a list, to make sure she didn't forget anything-- of pastoral concerns, mostly, but other issues too. You see, Mary had communication channels that just weren't available to Rectors and sometimes she knew things that you didn't but thought that you should--hurt feelings in the congregation, members having marital problems, financial problems, friendship problems, health problems, all kinds of things that other people wouldn't necessarily want to bring to the rector, but should. So sometimes the Matriarch becomes the emissary of the parish, in order to protect and to preserve the body, like a white blood cell fending off an infection.

Mary was actually a little more hands on than most Church Mothers, though. I wish you could have been on some of our "outings" when I first arrived at St. Luke's. Every August for several years we would visit her prospective Sunday school youth at their homes, trying to get them interested in the fall term. But they were surprise attacks, no telephone calls, a bullying tactic that sometimes worked. Imagine how fun that was for all the youth. But we soon began to realize that there was a pattern each year that developed. After the first surprise visitation, none of the other kids seemed to be home. Then we realized that they were calling each other with the warning to "get out of their houses as quickly as possible. The matriarch and the priest were on their way." Mary also took me on pastoral field trips to visit some of the elderly ladies in the parish that I wouldn't necessarily see at church, due to their frailty. But they were women who had done their part, women that I needed to know, and to keep in mind that they'd once played important roles in the life of St. Luke's. That was how I got to know women like Murelle Mahoney, who had at one time played piano for the Church, and Cham Massey (known as the dragon lady to the altar guild, but I didn't give her that title), and others that I suppose have been all but forgotten. Mary was really good that way. She didn't forget them, and you might be surprised to know how many there were over the years that she quietly cared for.

Now, don't get the impression that matriarchs are perfect. They are no less subject to the foibles of character than anyone else. I remember Mary coming into the office on more than one occasion sheepish confessing, "Well, I really blew it this week." She could get herself into some hot water from time to time--impatience, temper, misunderstanding... and then it was time for me to bail her out instead of the other way around. We had each other's back.

Interesting reading from John 11, the selected Gospel, in which you have the two sisters, Martha and Mary. Along with their brother Lazarus, they were some of Jesus' closest friends from the town of Bethany. Martha is the only one you hear from in this passage, but these two sisters are sometimes described as polar opposites--one who understood the details of servanthood, working her fingers to the bone in the kitchen in order to provide the hospitality necessary for their guests, that being Martha, and the other who was more inclined toward the spiritual practices of prayer and contemplation, Mary. But when it came to the issue of grief, and what I see as a kind of veiled anger at Jesus not meeting their expressed wish to save their brother, (had he not taken so long in getting there), they had a lot to learn. They're often held up as paragons of two different kinds of virtue, but neither one of them had it all figured out. Oh, if we could only be the two of them rolled into one! But we're always lacking something, something that we hope will complete us to be wiser, more loving, more compassionate, more effective, to have a more balanced approach to life. But no one is exempt from that struggle--not the Patriarchs, not the Matriarchs. We are all of us sinners, in need of redeeming, in this life and the next, to become more and more of what God intends.

God has now saved and raised Mary to the new life that awaits her, and wouldn't it be interesting to know what that would look like for her, because I expect that it's different for each person. Will she still argue with George? I don't know.

She had such a sharp wit, she was extremely well read, if you can be generous to a fault, she was. Wonderful mother, grandmother, great grand. She was a bossy born leader who helped make things happen in liturgy, outreach, Christian education, and pastoral care. Her Sunday school students meant the world to her, and if you listened to her you were going to learn. She was the best Sunday school teacher I've ever known. Mary shared a letter with me from a former student that I'd also known, who'd attended Stanford and enrolled in a bible course his freshman year. And in this letter Bob told her what a breeze it was because of Mary's three year tutorial. But Mary was more than an instructor. I was conducting a burial service at Criswell's a couple of years ago for a woman, Jana, who had been in Mary's classes early on, and, of course, Mary was there for her funeral. At the point just after my homily I saw her hand go up, and I thought, "uh-oh." And she was her usual insistent self. "Father John, can I say something." And this was at a time when I wasn't quite sure what she would say. But I said, "sure." And Mary offered the most beautiful, kind testimony to what this woman had meant to her, how she knew her, how they'd kept in touch through good times and bad. Jana already had a good mother, but when Mary Gurley adopted you, you always had a backup. No judgment, just love. And she was that way with every one of her young people. She would be their advocate.

Be comforted in the fact that she will always be our advocate as well. Her memory will serve to nurture, and strengthen, and help us commit ourselves to the important work of God in this place. I don't know what else I can say. I've got a hundred other stories and many more that I've forgotten. I'm going to miss Mary and George's parties. They were always having guests for the weekend, and if it was someone I knew, I always got an invitation. I'll miss watching the Wimbledon championships with them after the Sunday service. What great fun they were. But as Susan told me yesterday, they're together now. No fanfare necessary. God bless them in their new adventure, and through future generations of Matriarchs, may God bless this parish family. Amen.