

The Blessing of a Life: Lina Turner MacNeill
First Baptist Church of Weston
Sunday, March 2, 2003
Sermon by the Reverend Maddie MacNeill Sifantus

I love the Lord, He has blessed me so;
My heart is filled with a wondrous glow;
And the joy I find, and the peace I know!
I love the Lord, He has blessed me so.¹

“I love the Lord, He has blessed me so,” we sing. We express the blessing of thankfulness—the blessing of abundance. “My heart is filled with a wondrous glow.” We wonder at the gifts and blessings we are given. And we find joy. And we find peace. All that in the short space of the little song that was chosen to proceed my words to you this hour.

We are here together this morning to worship together. We are a blessed community here for this time we have taken out of our lives and set apart from our week. I feel blessed and privileged to be among you. And I feel blessed that my parents have become part of this community, as they have accepted the call to membership here among you which you are recognizing next week in your communion service. And I feel blessed and thankful that Lisa and Dean were open to the suggestion I made some months ago that we come into this circle together this morning, a time where this faith community, the Golden Tones community, and our family could be together, a time indeed of “wondrous glow”.

We are here together this morning to celebrate the life of someone dear to many of us here gathered, with the joyful realization that we can think of the blessing of such of life with her here with us. To say happy ninetieth birthday to someone in the context of worship is to be aware of the ultimate blessing we all share in the gift of life from our creator, however we may understand God. As we know, human beings use this gift of life in many ways, some productive, some destructive. Some reflect on and examine their gift of life and their path of faith. Some do not. We also know that some lives are so difficult that it may seem that the blessing is obscured. But some take the blessing of a life and in turn bless others with that gift. We don’t often either get the chance or take the opportunity to thank someone for the blessing of her or his life. That is the opportunity we are taking this morning. Mom, in the next few moments, I ask you to bask in

¹ Author unknown.

that “wondrous glow” mentioned in our hymn which you chose. May we all find joy and peace in the blessing of life, even in unsettled times such as these.

For some of us here, Lina is someone who has been attending this Church these last few years, and we know her as a member of this congregation, a fellow traveler on the path of faith. For others among us, she is a talented pianist, someone who has given her time these last fifteen years to the members of our elder chorus, the Golden Tones, many of whom are assisting our worship this morning. Indeed, without her collaboration with me these many years, this chorus and community of musical good will ambassadors would not exist. We also know Lina as someone who entertained the troops in Europe as a member of the USO and who played at innumerable community and church events over the years. For some of us, she is a trusted and valued friend—a woman of hospitality and compassion. And for some here this morning, she is a beloved wife, aunt, sister, grandmother, and mother.

The main theme that arose this week for me while planning this service is that of blessing. The blessing of a life. I started from one particular life, that of Lina Turner MacNeill. I thought about how she was blessed with her own parents and siblings and later how she blessed her own children and those people she met in her churches and community. Landmarks like a ninetieth birthday always bring memories and reminiscence—the looking back at the events and people who have brought meaning to our lives. To look back at a life in the context of faith, however, is a bit different than making a list of accomplishments or a curriculum vitae. Each of our faith journeys has its own shape, its own milestones. We have each come from a particular family, community, and ethnic group. How we have learned to make meaning in our lives differs, even from the person we sit next to in the pew week after week. Even when we have heard the same scriptures and said the same words of prayer or meditation together. This diversity is part of the wondrous blessing of God’s creation, it seems to me—despite the fact that we may all sometimes wish for the same answers to the big questions of meaning we all ask as human beings and children of God—even ninety year old children!

There is a magnet on my refrigerator which has a quote from American statesmen and philosopher, Thomas Jefferson. It reads: “It is in our lives, and not from our words, that our religion must be read.” This is not to say that words aren’t a wonderful thing...otherwise people like Dean, Lisa and I wouldn’t have as much to do on a Sunday morning and professors like my sister Bonnie might be out of a job...although Bonnie could then just bring out her cello!

Jefferson himself had a way with words. But he says that what is most important is how we *live* our lives--what we choose to focus on, how we treat others and ourselves. Those of us who have had the blessing to be parents know that our children see *how* it is we are living, rather than what we may be telling them, and they will model themselves on that—or rebel from that model. We can talk ourselves blue in the face to convince our children of a certain point of view, but if we *live* a different way, *that* is what they will learn.

So how do we read Lina's life? In a few short moments! After all, she will be 90 this Wednesday. While doing my preparation, I started by asking her some questions, as I was deciding what hymns we might sing and scriptures we might read this morning. And I held her answers to those questions against my memories of growing up as her eldest child and my experience of her as an adult and during these last fifteen years when we have worked so closely together, as well as going through the kinds of passages we all do as we age. When I asked her to think about favorite texts from the scriptures, she came up with several psalms, one of which we adapted for our call to worship this morning and another the familiar words of the twenty-third psalm which Harris read for us. I think it is telling that she chose psalms rather than other texts, since we know that when they were written in the ancient times of the Hebrew Bible, they were meant to be sung in worship, And we know that the psalms are often sung in the Episcopal tradition that she grew up in.

Many of the psalms have musical imagery. For instance, there is another psalm that I often use as the call to worship when I do a service about my ministry with the Golden Tones. The service is called *Singing Through Our Lives*. The psalm is usually read right after Mom has played some lovely piece from Bach.

O sing a new song to the Eternal
Shout praise, all earth, break into music and song!
Praise the eternal with the lyre, with lyre and song.
Let the sea and all within it thunder praise,
The world and its inhabitants,
Let rivers clap their hands
Let mountains sing in chorus
O sing a new song to the Eternal!²

These musical images combine with powerful images of nature, both of which I see in how my mother has made meaning in her life, where she has found her relationship with her

² Psalm 98, SLT 421

creator and with Jesus. She talks often of how she stops to notice the beauty of nature, especially looking out the windows in the back of my parents' home in Wayland: the changing seasons, the flowers and birds, the deer traveling through, and most especially the sunsets. She sees God powerfully in the wonders of nature, in God's garden; it is when she feels most strongly the presence of the divine, as in the words of the hymn we sang earlier: "and he walks with me and he talks with me and he tells me I am his own." It is where she has found particular peace and grace in her older years, since all us kids have been out of the house and off in our own lives. And it is a joy she shares with my father, along with the welcome of whispering hope even in the midst of the storms and tempests of lives lived so long together.

I think that the two psalms she chose speak about the relationship she has with God, for her a personal relationship. The first one expressing her reliance on her creator and her wish to be in worship of and in relation with her God: "I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall be continually in my mouth." And a bit further: "look to him and be radiant"—that "wondrous glow", again. The second psalm puts her in that garden, in those green pastures with her shepherd. I think that metaphors, such as that of a shepherd, can be important to how we form our understanding of the divine and how we live our life. My mother has often talked about feeling led. This fits in well with the imagery of the shepherd who leads the sheep from danger and has their welfare continually in mind in all decisions that are made. The shepherd is the nurturer, the caretaker. The shepherd is the servant which is yet another powerful metaphor of who Jesus is and how we can live our lives.

The servant metaphor certainly works for my mother. I can't imagine anyone more in service of her family, her neighborhood, her church and her God than she has been in her lifetime. She has told me that as a youngster she felt called to be a missionary, but her father did not approve of that idea! She often talked to us about doing things for others, and she certainly modeled that, sometimes to her own detriment. In addition to the many ways she has used her musical talents over the years, no one in our family will forget her days of accompanying rhythms at CFO, Camp Farthest Out. There is not enough time to say more than a few words about what that place was to my family, let alone to my mother's path of faith. Or mine. In brief, CFO was and is a non-denominational retreat, part of a movement that was started by educator and man of God, Glenn Clark. It was all about going farther out with God, which was a full life

experience, before the days of the terminology of holistic health. Here is a representative quote from Clark:

Eat less, exercise more.
Talk less, think more.
Ride less, walk more.
Worry less, work more.
Waste less, give more.
Preach less, practice more.
Frown less, laugh more.
Grumble less, thank more.
Scold less, praise more.
Regret less, aspire more
Hate less, *love more*.

Both of my parents subscribed to Clark's philosophy, and our family attended CFO for one week every summer from 1958 until recent years. One hour of each day was devoted to an activity that the whole camp attended, children and adults alike, called rhythms. It was led by the inimitable Alice Craft, who would say things like, "It's a new day!" That blessing theology again. I have a vivid picture in my mind's eye of my mother sitting at the beat up piano on the porch of the chapel playing "Over and over like the mighty sea, comes the love of Jesus, flowing over me. Over the sea, over the sea, Jesus Savior pilot me. Over the sea, over the sea, Savior pilot me."³ Every morning and every evening there would be a talk by one of the two speakers who would lead the camp for that season. Before the talk, which was like an hour-long sermon, a short song would be sung to bring those assembled into the proper meditative mood to be open to the message. The short hymn we sang before I began these remarks is one of those songs: "I Love the Lord, He Has Blessed Me So."⁴

The speakers we heard as children became friends of my parents and often one or the other would stay in our Wayland home before or after camp. They included people like Hannah Hurnard who wrote many inspirational books- Ruth Carter Stapleton, the evangelist who was Jimmy Carter's sister and focused on the healing of the memories- a man who will always stand out in my mind, Starr Daily, an ex-con who wrote a book called *Love Can Open Prison Doors*, among other titles. He modeled for me that one can be a person of faith and still have a sense of humor—that religion can be truly a joyous thing without a trace of pomposity. Probably the most influential speaker on my mother and our family, though, was Dr. Frank Laubach, the literacy

³ *CFO Sings*, 289.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 317.

pioneer. He certainly has a central place in my faith formation and understanding of the modern world. I can remember him standing behind the pulpit at Winni, as we called the place, holding a globe and talking about “one world”. For some years our dining room table in Wayland was affectionately called by us kids the Laubach factory, as we assembled mailings about his work and literacy trainings. His motto was Each One Teach One, and my mother was pivotal in its early organization in our area.

As I was driving last Sunday through Sudbury on the way to sing *Laudate Dominum* at St. John’s Evangelical Lutheran Church, there were some words on the roadside pulpit in front of the First Parish Church that spoke to me again of my mother’s life: “May your life preach more loudly than your lips.” Lina did not become the professional, ordained minister that her daughter did, but she held the nativity plays in her basement, complete with music and bed sheet curtains. She opened our home to visitors from the world over, from Korea to China, from Africa to Belgium—a certain Christian Fallet, who made a special trip all the way from Brussels to be with us this day to celebrate this special woman. And she was centrally involved in church communities, even holding church in our home on a number of occasions. The Church of the Holy Spirit, the Episcopal Church in Wayland, began in our living room. The Circle of Light used to meet in our basement. Here our Lina was the Lydia of our reading from Acts, which described the early Pauline community of the Philippians and the role of a woman in its success: Remember the words: “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay in my home.” Lydia was a dealer in purple goods, meaning that she was a person of means in her day. She was quite willing to share from her goodness in the service of the Apostle Paul, his missionary efforts, and thus in the movement of the Gospel. Lina has always been quite aware of how she has been blessed in life, with her circumstances and her talent, and she has and continues to share that goodness, those blessings, as did Lydia. They both preached loudly with their lives. Lydia is one of the foundations of our Christian church. Lina modeled that preaching with her life to those around her and especially to her children, and I, for one, am profoundly grateful. With our world in the situation it is in, it is easy to think that there is nothing one person can do; that there is no use of sharing our goodness. There words from my Unitarian Universalist tradition written by Edward Everett Hale:

I am only one
But still I am one.
I cannot do everything,

But still I can do something.
And because I cannot do everything
I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.⁵

Mom was not worried about being “the one”. She did not want fame or recognition for what she did for those around her. She still doesn’t....

There is so much that any of the four of us children or the nine grandsons could say about our mother, but I am going to leave it at that for just now. Many of you may have memories or stories you may wish to share, not to mention things you may wish that I did say this morning. But I prefer to leave you with the image that is important to her still, the comforting image of the shepherd that sees our every need and can lead us to those green pastures. As we all grow older, we need something to lead us on. We can all be someone to lean on, as my mother has been for many. We all long for overflowing cups, quiet waters, and paths of blessedness.

⁵ SLT 457.

The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want, he makes me down to lie
In pastures green he leadeth me the quiet waters by
He leadeth me, he leadeth me, the quiet waters by.

My soul He doth restore again,
And me to walk doth make
Within the Paths of Blessedness, e'en for His own Name's sake.
Within the paths of Blessedness, e'en for His own Name's sake.

Yea, though I pass thro' shadowed vale, yet will I fear no ill;
For Thou are with me, and thy rod and staff me comfort still.
Thy rod and staff me comfort still, me com-fort still.

My table Thou hast furnish-ed in presence of my foes;
My head with oil Thou dost anoint And my cup overflows.
My head Thou dost with oil anoint, and my cup overflows.

Goodness and mercy all my days will surely comfort me;
And in my father's heart always my dwelling place shall be
And in my heart for evermore Thy dwelling place shall be.⁶

May goodness and mercy follow you all your days. May we each of us dwell in peace
and on the paths of blessedness. May we feel the presence of that which is greater than ourselves
even when we pass through the storms and tempests of our lives and through the shadowed vale.
And may we rejoice in times such as these. Amen.

Happy birthday Mom!

⁶ *Brother James Air*, arr. by Phyllis Tate, Oxford University Press. ISBN 0 19 345811X