

**A Sermon for the Memorial Service of
BETSY LOVE
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Today is just a single day we have set aside to remember and honor Betsy Love. But it is also the culmination of a long season – a season of mourning, waiting, and planning. At the time Betsy died on May 8 of last year, we were in the full grip of a global pandemic. It was impossible to see Betsy during the final days of her life, to offer her our companionship and comfort. When we received word of her death, it seemed surreal. We had already been separated from Betsy by social distancing; when we heard about this final separation, it was almost incomprehensible. How could it be that we would never see Betsy again?

And then, to add insult to injury, it was impossible to have an in-person service to honor Betsy in the immediate aftermath of her death. Losing Betsy was difficult enough, but our grief was complicated by the fact that we were unable to achieve closure in the customary ways. Weeks of waiting stretched into months, and months into a full year. But there was never any doubt that the day would come when her family and friends would gather to put a proper punctuation mark on Betsy’s life. Thankfully, that day has finally arrived. Betsy is getting the tribute she was due – a tribute which is long over-due. And you and I are getting to do some things that are deeply important to us – to ensure that Betsy’s life and death don’t get lost in the chaos of a world-wide health crisis, and to say a proper goodbye to this remarkable woman.

And so, this service today is a testimony to true grit – to the determination of Mimi, Larry, and all of us to honor Betsy – better late than never. We were determined to do this, in part, because we need to acknowledge that Betsy’s death actually occurred, even if we were unable to witness it and grasp it at the time. Her death mattered to us and brought us a great sense of loss and grief.

The truth is, our grieving began when Betsy’s health began to decline a few years ago and we began to realize that her condition was irreversible. Betsy lived nearly seven decades, which is at least something to be grateful for; but her death seemed untimely because she still had so much to live for and so many good gifts yet to share. When the end finally came, the fact that it was inevitable didn’t make it any easier to digest. Betsy was taken from us too soon, and we weren’t ready to let her go.

Some years ago, a college professor in Virginia named Sheldon Vanauken wrote a memoir about his romance and marriage to an exceptional woman named Davy. Their life together ended prematurely and tragically: as a relatively young woman Davy contracted a rare disease and eventually succumbed to it. In a memorable turn-of-phrase, Vanauken referred to his wife’s death as “a severe mercy.” That phrase came back to me in connection with the loss of Betsy Love. Betsy’s death was a “mercy” because it relieved her of her bodily limitations and suffering; but her death was also “severe” because it was so difficult and costly both to her and to us.

Of course, grief is a two-sided coin, and the other side of the coin is love. Grieving is the price we pay for loving, and our grieving is often in proportion to our loving. The depth of our grief for Betsy is a sign of the depth of our affection and respect for her as a human being. You

and I were determined to have this memorial service for Betsy not only because her death mattered, but because her life mattered. For starters, the little things in her life mattered and are sorely missed: her dry, sly sense of humor; her disarming candor; the delight she took in walking her dogs and riding on her lawnmower; the simple charm and warm hospitality of her home. But Betsy also accomplished some big things across her 69 years. She was a devoted family member, a loyal friend, a generous contributor to her church and community, and a gifted and creative artist.

One of my favorite guides to creativity is a book by Julia Cameron entitled *The Artist's Way*. The author says that all of us have an “inner artist” – our own distinctive ways of expressing our creativity – but she notes that our inner artist tends to get stuck. We’ve all heard of “writer’s block”; well, all of us experience blocks to our creativity, and Julia Cameron offers techniques to loosen up those areas where our creative flow is restricted. The “artist’s way” is the way of free and fluid expression, unencumbered by self-doubt or the critique of others.

Betsy had this quality, as well as many other attributes of “the artist’s way.” Artists are often true individuals who march to the beat of a different drummer; they can be quirky and eccentric. Artists are highly observant – they see things the rest of us don’t see, or see things we do see, but see them in a different way. The artist’s vocation is to share his or her unique vision, even though it may be surprising or even confounding to the viewer. Artists are often passionate people – passionate about their subject matter, about the process of making art, about life itself. We’ve all observed the “artistic temperament,” which is sometimes temperamental and can lead to intense and turbulent relationships. And artists can be intense in another way: they are fully immersed in the human condition, and their work often reflects their own suffering and the suffering of others.

Betsy’s life and art had many of these characteristics, but it had one characteristic that stood out above all the others, at least to me. Some artists are perceived as being selfish because their work is all about self-expression. But Betsy’s work as an artist was not selfish; it was altruistic. She allowed her talent to be of service to humanity, to be an instrument of healing, to help others discover their own capacity for self-expression. Betsy’s last name could not have been more fitting. For Betsy, the “artist’s way” was the way of love: a love not only for art but for people – people who could benefit from art and even become artists themselves.

Friends, this is why you and I are honoring Betsy today – because her life had such vitality and value; because her death diminished our own lives; because her death mattered; and more importantly, because her life mattered. Her life mattered to us; and even better, it mattered to God, and it always will. Lest we forget: your life and my life also matter to God – both this life and the life to come. What the psalmist said about himself is true for each one of us: because God’s goodness and mercy have followed us all the days of our lives, therefore, we know that we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. As Christians, we acknowledge that death is real and death is strong; but we also believe that love is stronger than death, and that the love of God has vanquished death in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Betsy was a visual artist who specialized in painting, pottery, and sculpture. Today I’m reminded of an example of two other forms of art – film and poetry. I once saw a movie starring the British actress Emma Thompson, a film simply entitled “Wit.” It tells the story of Vivian Bearing, a disciplined, esteemed English professor dealing with a sensitive issue – her own health.

After being diagnosed with ovarian cancer, Vivian is forced to reassess her life and decide what's really important.

At one point in the film there is a flashback to Vivian's days as a graduate student. She walks into the office of her academic supervisor, Professor Ashford, who proceeds to read the riot act to her star pupil. Professor Ashford is displeased with Vivian's essay on one of John Donne's memorable sonnets, "Death Be Not Proud," and tells her to throw out the essay and do it again. "Begin with the text," she says, "not with a feeling . . . You have used an edition of the text that is inauthentically punctuated: 'And Death shall be no more; (semicolon) Death thou shalt die! (exclamation point).'" Professor Ashford tells Vivian that this punctuation is far too melodramatic, and it's also wrong. She insists that Helen Gardner's edition of the text is more accurate and more appropriate: "And death shall be no more, (comma) death thou shalt die."

"Nothing but a breath, a comma, separates life from life everlasting," the professor says. "Very simple really. With the original punctuation restored, death is no longer something to act out on a stage with exclamation marks. It is a comma, a pause. Life, death, soul, God, past, present – not insuperable barriers, not semicolons, just a comma."

Friends, you didn't come here today for a lecture on punctuation or 16th century English poetry. But I wouldn't be surprised if you came here wanting to hear a word of hope. And I have that word for you: there is hope in a comma. And what changes the semicolon after death into a comma is the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead. In him, the barriers between life and death and life everlasting have been broken down.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? . . . But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:54-57). It is because of him that we can face death squarely and say, "Death Be Not Proud." It is because of him that a Christian memorial service is an occasion for both grieving and thanksgiving. It is because of him that Betsy's death is but a comma, a pause. On the other side of that pause there is peace, healing, and wholeness – for Betsy, and for all of us – in the presence of our heavenly Father and the communion of the saints. Thanks be to God!