

Memorial Service for Deborah Jane Myers

March 21, 2009
Pastor Mark Nieting

John 11: 1-27

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, to you....the family and friends of Debbie, who is now with her Lord.

It was only a few weeks ago when I received a flurry of calls asking if I would visit, as they each said, a "*dear friend who was struggling with cancer.*" I recall two thoughts running through my head at about the same time..... my mind, now that I've hit the big six-oh has a "two-thought-limit." The first was "*who IS this person?*" and the second was "*this must be one special person to have friends like this!*"

On March 2 I visited Debbie for the first time.....which answered my question of just "who she was" with the following adjectives: welcoming, special, warm, inviting, friendly and extremely cheerful person who used to worship here at Hope before she moved up to 207 in Norfolk. I'm not sure what I expected and I'm not sure what Debbie expected.....but I KNOW that I got the better part of the deal. I got to meet Deborah Jane Myers.

I'm careful about using this phrase in church, but nevertheless, I'll wager the milk money that every single person in this room today with the possible exception of a few members of the Hope staff knew Debbie better than I did. We've heard some of you sharing "Debbie stories" and telling "Debbie-tales" both formally in the service and informally out in the hallways before the service. Some of you may have even such a few, shall we say, exaggerations(?) into the mix just to make it fun, and I encourage you all to keep it up.....not the lies, but most certainly the stories, as a way to remember our dear sister in Christ now fallen asleep and to bring strength to each other during the process of grieving.

A week passed and I was able to meet Debbie again, this time to bring her Holy Communion. The body was certainly weaker, but not her Spirit and certainly not her Smile....as she received the forgiveness of her sins while receiving the Sacrament. I still remember her sipping a bit of wine out of the cup....which was quite cool....and then she downed the rest of it with a relish and an "ahhhhh, that

was good!" I even asked her if she wanted some more, something THIS pastor doesn't usually do with the Lord's Supper....and she even thought about it for a moment..... before tactfully refusing.

That was March 10....and now here we sit, just 11 days later, asking ourselves some very significant questions about life in the present and in the future.

Have you asked yourself "Why?" "Why Debbie?" "Why cancer?" "Why now?" "Why....after holding cancer off for 20 years?" These are questions we all ask ourselves when we find ourselves sitting in the Memorial Service for a loved one, and they are good questions to ask and to have answered.

I know that there are a lot of people here today who have dealt with cancer in one way or another. About a year ago I was diagnosed with prostate cancer. Although I suspected from the symptoms that there was a problem (just the WORD "cancer" still runs a chill down my arm), a series of tests made it clear that something needed to be done. Pam and I did a lot of praying and a lot of research and talked to a lot of doctors. Finally last July 31 I met a very nice robot down at Norfolk General Hospital and had "it" removed from my body. Therefore I can say to you this afternoon that I am a cancer survivor! I am sure many of you are as well, some no doubt due to the hard work and endless efforts of Debbie and her untiring efforts to make better the lives of those who struggled with the very difficult disease that eventually claimed her life.

On Tuesday the 17th the most amazing group of people descended on my office to plan today's service. In 25 years of being a pastor I have NEVER experienced anything like the "sisterhood of Debbie" that came that afternoon. The only thing that would have made it any more amazing is if they had all been members of the Red Hat Society....but maybe you've just got those things hidden away somewhere. (?) Filled with love, dropping a few tears along the way, and brimming with more and more Debbie stories, they wanted to make today a real celebration, one that would give thanks to God for the gift of Debbie's life....and what she DID with that life....as well as inspire us all to, shall

we say, “go out and do likewise.” How these goals are met in the end, in the long run, isn’t up to me. It isn’t up to them. It’s up to each one of us accepting the gifts God has given us in our lives, using those gifts to the fullest, and embracing each day as if it were another gift from God, each one a precious “limited edition.”

Debbie liked animals....to be sure....and flowers as well. She was had a nice back yard garden and a very pretty bird feeder. She appreciated the beautiful things in life and took care of them. But did I choose a dog, a cat, or even a flower for today’s bulletin cover? After all, flowers “bloom where they are planted” and Debbie certainly did that. No... I chose a fully loaded, ready to be plucked grape vine....and I did it for a reason.....grape vines bear fruit!

Debbie’s life certainly bore fruit. We’ve heard testimony to that today from more than one of you, and as we said before, the fruit she bore will make a difference in the world far into the future. Like ripples from a stone thrown into a pond, Debbie’s passion for life and living touched hundreds, if not thousands of people.

And so....when the end finally arrived and she “fell asleep,” to use Jesus’ description of what happened to His friend Lazarus, I am sure that there are many who thought to themselves or even said out loud, *“I am SURE she’s in heaven....she’s been such a good person who has done so many good things.”*

Time out on the field, my friends, time out. We’re in the fourth week of Lent, the season Christians set aside to prepare ourselves for “Holy Week,” and especially for the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday. No one in their right minds could possibly say there was anything HUMANLY good what Jesus endured on Good Friday. What those very efficient Roman soldiers did to Jesus was nothing short of horrendous....but as Jesus neared death He told one of the others hanging next to Him, the one who had recognized Him for Who He truly was as the innocent Son of God, “Today you will be with me in paradise.”

One has to stop and be amazed. What chance did this man, condemned to die for being a common criminal, have to “do good things” and enough of them to receive Jesus’ promised passage to heaven? Putting all his deeds on a scale

of positive against negative I am quite sure he would come up far out of balance and not in a good way.

It was just before Jesus himself died that He uttered three words that made it truly GOOD for each one of us.... Jesus said, "*IT IS FINISHED.*" It wasn't His life to which He was referring.....after all, He KNEW He would be raised from the dead, just as He had raised Lazarus and many others in the years past. It was His WORK of bringing salvation to the world that was finished

Jesus had lived a PERFECT life, one that I can't live....you can't live....and Debbie couldn't live. Then...with that accomplished on our behalf, Jesus took our sins on Himself.....and offered Himself as full payment for all of them, His death exchanged for our life.

If we believe we go to heaven by being "good," then how "good" is good enough? Is 51% enough? Passing in government schools is what, 71%? Is that good enough? Or maybe 83% and perfect church attendance? Would that bring God around? No.....it wouldn't. God is PERFECT....and He cannot and will not allow ANY sin into His presence! It's only when we allow the perfect righteousness of Christ to cover us does we bring reality to the song AMAZING GRACE.....that while we were yet completely undeserving sinners, Christ died for us! That's the radical nature of God's love for us in Jesus Christ.....that it's never earned, always given.

That's the message I'd like you to hear today....after all....it is the message Debbie, I am absolutely certain, would speak to you from beyond the door of death, if she were given the words to do so. Bear fruit in your life....yes....but bear that fruit out of a loving response to what Jesus Christ has already done for you in your life.....and then, when that time comes and YOU too fall asleep, there will be a joyful reunion around the throne of heaven.

And to that, the people of God say "AMEN."