

A Celebration of the Life of Florence Rupp

December 29, 2005

Good morning! My name is John Hobbins. Thanks to an invitation I received from Kate and Mark Stover, members of Columbus United Methodist Church where I was pastor at the time, I became Florence's pastor in the last years of her life. Florence is Kate's aunt.

When I would go and visit Florence these last few years, I would often pray with her at the end of my visits. She was always respectful of my praying for her, but she herself lacked the confidence to pray on her own behalf. When I think of her, I think of these words from Psalm 73. They form a prayer that is true for her, even if she seemed so often unaware of the realities of her life:

Truly, God is good to Israel,
to those who are pure in heart.
But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled,
my steps had nearly slipped.
For I was envious of the arrogant
when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
When my soul was embittered,
when I was pricked in heart,
I was brutish and ignorant;
I was like a beast toward you.
Nevertheless, I am continually with you;
you hold my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will receive me to glory.
Whom have I in heaven but you?
And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.
My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

Florence Rupp was an extravagant uninhibited person. The dutiful, boring life most of us lead was not for her. She chose freedom early on and paid an enormous price for her freedom. She was sometimes remorseful for the hurt she had caused others, but she knew of no other way to live.

I enjoyed going to visit Florence. She was a living object lesson in many ways. When I saw her, I saw myself, only more so. I do not think and have never thought of myself as different from Florence. I am subject to the same habits that she was. I have a talent for seeing things my way. She had an extreme talent for seeing things her way. The amount of bitterness I can find room for in my heart is frightening. It was just as frightening in her. My self centeredness, especially when I am sick, can be very strong. Her self centeredness could reach comical proportions. Florence was a specimen of the human species no less and no more than the rest of us. She was an extravagant uninhibited example of what we all are.

Florence was born to first generation Norwegian immigrants in Mauston WI. The oldest of 8 siblings, her parents were successful farmers. Norwegian was spoken at home, and she remembered being taunted, together with her sister Sylvia, by the terrible Johnson brothers, who made fun of them and their Norwegian on their way home from school. The family eventually settled here in Rio. Florence developed a form of rheumatoid arthritis as a teenager. Her siblings had to take care of her, and take her around in a wagon. Very early on, she headed to Madison, and worked at Rayovac and then as a waitress. She must have enjoyed her freedom. She had an active social life, and she enjoyed dating the soldiers as they returned from duty in WWII. She met a dashing soldier named Johnnie Sky and she married him. She was all of 22 years old, and he could not have been much older. They had a daughter, Yvonne. But Yvonne's parents were unable to build a life together. Johnnie's plans included a return to the Ashland area, his native land, but that was unimaginable to Florence. They got a divorce, and Yvonne was raised by Florence's Mom. That was probably for the best, because it's not easy to imagine Florence as a full time mother in her twenties. It was not her cup of tea. In a very real sense, she abandoned Yvonne. Florence knew what she had done, and it caused her great pain to dwell on it. She confided her remorse to me, but found it easier to pretend not to care in other circumstances.

Florence succeeded in making a new start in her late thirties. Still in Madison, she met a studio photographer named Gordon Rupp and married him in 1958. They had a son named Keith whom Florence went on to raise. The marriage was a stormy one, with lots of ups and downs. They moved to Des Moines for a time, but eventually Florence, with the help of family, rented a flat in Madison, whereas Gordon eventually ended up in Texas. Florence and Keith lived in downtown Madison, and depended on family and AFDC to survive. Florence still considered herself Mrs. Gordon Rupp. In his absence, she described him as a sea captain, and she styled herself as a free lance writer. In a weird sort of way, it was all true. Florence was a free lancer. She was the author of her own life. There was one problem. Except for her son, the other people in her life were not the people she wanted in the novel she was writing. Her proud, independent lifestyle was possible, strange as it might sound, only because in reality she was totally dependent on others. If it had been up to her, she would have wanted to be able to affirm, with Blanche DuBois of Tennessee Williams *A Streetcar Named Desire*, "I always depend on the kindness of strangers." As it was, she depended on the kindness of family for her entire life.

Florence succeeded in raising Keith with high expectations. They would summer in the country with her daughter Yvonne and her family and with her sister Lucille and her family. This was a positive experience for Keith, and a way for everyone to reconnect, but summers were not without strains of their own.

Keith went on to college, to a career in journalism, business, and politics, but he also had to put some space between his very demanding mother and his life and that of his family. This was not a difficult choice, to be sure, but a wise one. So Florence found a new living situation herself. She moved to an apartment on Fuller St. in Columbus, where she lived for some 18 years. Self reliant in theory, she depended on the help of family nearby. Her grandchildren Elisabeth, Sarah, and Gary made a big difference in her life.

After she broke her hip and ended up in the hospital and then in a nursing home, she felt herself in a cage. It was the best and only place she could be, but of course she didn't see it that way. In her book, the novel she was writing, it was all an injustice. When I would visit her, she would talk at length about everyone in her family. If I succeeded in getting her to into a positive mood, which wasn't easy, she always had something good to say about everyone in her family. Some of you may find that hard to believe, but it's true.

Florence was a living object lesson in many a way. For me, she was living proof of the power of good over evil. As we all know, she had a bad habit of trying to alienate the very people who cared for her most. But thanks to the faithfulness and goodness of family, friends, and health care professionals, she did not succeed in turning people against her. The faithfulness and goodness of you who are here outlasted all her failures to accept you for who you are, and to accept the help and advice you had to offer.

I am convinced that we all have a calling in life, and in one way or another, we fulfill it. What was Florence's calling in life? I think she was a would-be author. She wanted to be the author of her own life, and to some extent she succeeded, though not always to her own benefit. If that wasn't enough, she wanted to be the author of the lives of those around her. I sometimes got the impression that she viewed almost everyone of us as a clueless Dorothy, or Scarecrow, or Tin Man, or Cowardly Lion. She, on the other hand, knew the score. She, on the other hand, was no one's fool. When she wanted to, she could be charming and well-wishing, like the good witch of the north. Also when she wanted, she seemed a lot like the wicked witch of the West.

She took a yellow brick road of her own choosing, not the same one that most of us take. And the amazing, marvelous thing is that God watched out for her through all her journeys and misfortunes just as He watches out for everyone of us.

Visiting Florence was sometimes like visiting a pouting teenager in an 80 year old body. But I couldn't help thinking: God loves her just as much as the next pouting teenager. Now Florence stands in God's presence. She is fully conscious of the past, present, and future. She now sees others as God sees them. She now sees herself as God sees her.

Let us pray. O God, our Creator and Redeemer, we entrust Florence to your amazing grace. Heal her body and soul. Help us to remember the joy she found, however briefly, in the pleasures that came her way. Help us to find the joy and peace that you desire for each one of us. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. Amen.