

A Celebration of the Life of Marjorie Marquart
1913-2010

By the grace of God, life and death are a seamless whole in the lives of the faithful. It doesn't always work that way, but when it does, it is something to behold. I was privileged to see it in the case of Marjorie Marquart, born again to eternal life at age 96 a few days ago. Her family and I know that she went about dying with the same care she went about living. She blessed us in her death as she had done in her life. The funeral was a gathering of family and friends, some of whom hadn't seen each other for 50 years. They rejoiced in each other's company; they rejoiced in the lovely spread prepared for them by the members of the congregation. They rejoiced in the opportunity to remember Marjorie's life. This is what I said in memory of her.

In the opening words of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, Jesus describes the be-attitudes that make for a life that God blesses to the full. Marjorie exemplified those attitudes in her life. She was a dedicated and caring person. She had none of the flash that will get you on the cover of People magazine. Instead, her life shined with the qualities Jesus lifted up as the source of true happiness.

Marjorie was a meek and an unassuming person. "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth." Marjorie loved the land. Just as Jesus suggests, she inherited the earth.

Marjorie knew how to mourn in the wake of the loss of someone she loved, or someone she knew someone else loved. "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." Day by day and through the night, God comforted her and gave her an abiding joy in the simple pleasures of life.

Marjorie "hungered and thirsted after righteousness." She was aware of the injustices of which life is full. I don't think she was ever satisfied with the ways things are. She kept up on current events near and far, and saw through the nonsense of so much that goes on around us. She made sure she was a good steward of the things God gave her: the land, her family and friends, her church, her country, the entire world. She embodied the traditional conservative values which are typical of family farmers in Wisconsin. This made her uncomfortable with politicians who always seem to find a way and reason to destroy things and waste things and overlook the needs of ordinary people.

Marjorie was pure in heart. She saw that many things that happen around us cannot possibly be an expression of God's will. Therefore she prayed, with understanding and conviction, that God's will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

She was a merciful person, and she raised a family of merciful children. Was she shown mercy in her life? Yes she was. For more than nine and a half decades, she lived in God's country, surrounded by family and friends. Even when she lived alone on the homestead, she was not alone. Her family and friends were always in her thoughts.

For nine and a half decades, she lived in a world full of all things bright and beautiful. What she observed out the window in the countryside she loved, what she read about on the written page, she cherished, with the gentle consideration she gave everything. In her last days on earth, she was surrounded by her blood family and her church family.

She had a good life, and she had a good death. She knew she was going to die, and welcomed it with the same mixture of patience and impatience with which she accepted everything from the hand of her Maker and Redeemer.

If there is one thing I wish we could all learn from Marjorie, it is that mixture of patience and impatience that gave balance to her life.

Marjorie was born 96 years ago on the family farm in Oakfield, Wisconsin. It was 1913. A devastating world war was about to break out, destroying the lives of millions of people. Against that background of which she knew nothing, Marjorie found herself, as the second of ten children on a busy farm, the oldest daughter, with domestic responsibilities right from the start. As an oldest child, one of eight, I recognized a fellow traveler in Marjorie from the first time we met. She carried the world on her shoulders, as first-born boys and girls often do. She carried the world on her shoulders very well.

It could not have been too much fun to be parented by one's older sister, no matter how much you knew she loved you. Later on, when Marjorie was the schoolteacher in the one-room schoolhouse not far from where her family lived, it is said that one of her sisters delayed going to school for a year to put off being under her sister's thumb a little while longer. [Laughter]

The 1920s and 1930s were difficult times for Wisconsin farm families. Marjorie's parents, William and Edith Geisthardt, bought a farm and lost it. They moved more than once from one rented farm to another. Marjorie remembered walking the cows for miles from one place to the other.

As a young woman, Marjorie liked to go dancing. This was before she married into an Evangelical family, which looked askance at dancing. [Laughter] But you know, Marjorie never gave up dancing. She danced with the wolves in her mind's eye. More exactly, she danced with the owl and the scarlet tanager, with the deer, the raccoon, and muskrat, the more sedate creatures which populate the Wisconsin countryside. She danced with the seasons and its changes, with the flora and fauna of which Aldo Leopold writes so moving in the *Sand County Almanac*, a book Marjorie knew well.

Marjorie knew how to connect with the moon and the stars the work of God's fingers. She taught her children to look at the full moon whenever it shines, and think about one another. That way, they have always been in each other's thoughts, no matter how far apart. She also taught them to look to the west and watch the sun go down, first red and then ever darker. If you can do those two things, connect with the moon and the stars the work of God's fingers, and with the sun that sets in the west, you will always be a healthy person.

She loved to walk through Hobb's Woods outside of Byron. She knew a rose-breasted grosbeak when she saw one, and delighted when she did. She knew that an oak tree is a living creature, planted by God himself, as the Bible says the trees of the forest are. I don't know if she ever read it, but she would identify with the episode in *The Lord of the Rings* in which the trees take revenge on the wickedness of mortals.

As the oldest sister in a family of ten, she did everything she could to keep everyone comfortable. She took care of people. She had a gift of empathy. That was who she was. Here she was, in her 90s, and all she wanted to do for me, her pastor half her age, was to make me a pie, to cook for me. She thought of God as the one who takes care of us. She imitated God whenever she made a bed, whenever she cooked, whenever she farmed.

She once remarked to a granddaughter, "I never had a doll." She had *real babies* to take of, from the time she could hold one in her arms. Growing up she had very little,

There was no heat in the bedrooms where they slept. So they put their winter coats on top of their beds to stay warm.

Marjorie became a teacher, because that is who she was. Think back for a moment about what school was like in a one-room schoolhouse of the 1930s and 40s. She taught in three: the Lone Oak School of the Town of Byron, the Highland-Harvey Grade School of the Town of Oakfield, and the Alto School of the Town of Waupun. A woman of sharp intelligence, who preferred to teach rather than marry for a good long time, she passed on to her students a love of learning. In those days, Wisconsin Public Radio aired a number of programs designed to be heard in elementary schools. Marjorie was a lifelong listener to public radio, a member of the Wisconsin State Historical Society, and the Arbor Day Foundation. She was a citizen of the land. What a joy to visit her and talk about the news. She knew a hundred times more about goings on in the world than the average American who watches Good Morning America or Fox for their news. A hundred times more. She passed on her insatiable curiosity for nature and society to her students, first as a schoolteacher before she married Vernon Marquart in 1945 at age 32, then to her 4-H students for more than 25 years, and to her own children.

She was blessed to farm with son John for 10 years. She loved being outside working with animals and doing chores, always said it was better than doing housework any day. It was a refuge for her when things weren't going well with her husband in his later years. She was full of grit and knew how to deal with a sick or dying animal, machinery breakdowns, frozen pipes, and power outages. Her example of how you "keep going when the going gets tough" is a lesson her son John will remember forever.

Marjorie was not a long-winded person, and the last thing I want to be in celebrating her life is long winded. She could sum up a person in a single phrase. At her sister Lorene's funeral in 1996, relatives shared their stories of the wonderful things Lorene did. After a few of these tributes Marge got up and said just one phrase: "I never met a more Christian woman." She sat down. Pretty much trumped what anybody else contributed. If Lorene was the most Christian woman she ever met, she of course wasn't far behind.

At age 92, in an interview for a local newspaper, she summed up her respect for her husband with words he would have appreciated: "I always thought my husband, Vernon, was one of the best farmers in Dodge County. He always said it was more fun farming with horses." And she remembered the names of the teams of horses on the Geisthardt farm where she grew up, and on the Marquart farm she came to, in 1945 as a new bride. There was Sparky and Dolly and Mike and Barney and Dolly and Queen. "The most we ever had was 25 to 30 cows," she said. "We made our living. We sent all of our children to school. And we paid our taxes."

I could go on at length about Marjorie's love of learning, literature and history, of music and God's green earth, of children and grandchildren. But I will keep it short, as she would like it.

The apostle Paul tells us that everything will pass away, but three things abide forever, faith, hope and love, and the greatest of these is love. In a number of ways, in a great number of circumstances, Marjorie embodied these virtues. As followers of Jesus Christ, we believe that all events and experiences graced by those virtues have been shaped by God into her identity for all time in His presence. Now she rejoices in that presence. We are grateful for all she is and was for us. Let us pray.