

FULLY ALIVE!

We gather this afternoon to grieve the death of Inga Freyer Nicholas, but also to celebrate a life well and fully lived. We all have our memories of that life, the stories that will forever shimmer in our imaginations when we look back at the years we have shared with her on this earth.

Something about the essence of Inga always summons up words of the early church leader Irenaeus: “The glory of God is a human being fully alive.” FULLY ALIVE -- Maybe that’s why when I saw the acronym OSL after her name on the front of this afternoon’s worship bulletin, the phrase that first came to mind was not “The Order of St. Luke,” for which those letters actually stand. No, the spontaneous thought that rose unbidden was: One Sexy Lady.

Sexy in a good way. You know what I mean.

Recently I have been looking at photos of Inga as a young mother on her daughter Lisa’s loving Facebook tribute, and that essence of profound aliveness leaps off the screen. One of the characteristics we have always loved about Inga is her sensual earth motherliness, evoking a profound awareness of fertility and fecundity, overflowing with abundance for the nurturance of all who might come her way. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, the mythical Earth Mother simply produces everything, inexhaustibly, from herself. And so it has always seemed of Inga.

I first knew Inga in 1978 when I went to her church in Providence, RI, as a student pastor. She was the best sort of church member, a committed worker in the life of the church yet always full of fun. As a neophyte in ministry, believe me, I appreciated her bright spirit and her hospitality – including the occasional lunch in her sunny, cheerful dining room, accompanied by a glass of Riunite Bianco wine, and, of course, her laughter. I also cherished her willingness to pitch in and help out when a project was under way. She knew how to have a good time, she was the life of the party, but she also knew what it takes to make life good for others.

I remember how she helped out with church school, playing the guitar and teaching the children to sing songs of the faith, holding hands with them as they stood in a circle to pray. My kids remember the years with her there also, and young as they were then, to this moment describe her as “real.” I remember the day her tiny daughter Christina in that prayer circle solemnly lifted her prayer of gratitude to God: “I thank God for my bed.” What wisdom she had -- maybe three years old at the time. Where did both her daughters acquire such love and wisdom at such young ages? Wise old souls, so like their mother.

One of my early memories of Inga in worship occurred the Sunday when I was scheduled to preach on God as Love, from I John 4:7-21. I had asked Inga to read Scripture that day, and I sat behind the pulpit as she moved confidently into the lectern with Bible in hand and read beautifully John 4:7-21, the story of the Samaritan woman. At the time I thought she had it wrong: chapter four, verses seven through twenty-one, yes, but the Gospel of John instead of the First Letter of John from which I was preaching. But even as I preached my sermon I realized there is in fact more similarity than difference in the texts. Consider the connection:

From the First Letter of John: “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love...We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates brother or sister, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love sister or brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And God has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love brother and sister” (4:7-8, 13, 20-21).

From the Gospel of John: The story of the Samaritan woman at the well – one of the marginalized Samaritans, considered outcasts by the Jews, and this one judged a flawed one at that,

to whom Jesus offered living water, saying, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give will become a spring of water welling up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water" – and then she went away, overflowing with what she had received to share it with the others (4:13-15).

These are words and ways of a hospitable, generous God whose love spills out in an abundance of nurturance to all who come God's way, and who gives us that same spirit that we may do likewise. That love comes at a cost, yet it comes inexhaustibly.

As I watched Inga shape her life, I realized that those two texts are in fact variations on one theme, and Inga had it right long before she also went to seminary and began to preach with her words as well as her life. We might attribute to her as well words of the text calling her to ministry, first spoken to the prophet Jeremiah: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart" (1:5). We might see her as an answer to the Ephesian prayer: "I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God" (3:17-19). God's kind of love was manifest in her life from the very start and has never ceased. The grace of God over and around her lies from before her birth through all of her days even until her death and beyond, eternally, and the glory of God shines through her.

Many of you know of the Palm Sunday sermon¹ Inga preached in 1998. It tells the story of Jesus this way: "He was the life of every party. Because he loved God and loved others, this man would be wherever the people in the village or city were. He worshipped with them. He offered hospitality and food and drink to all who were there. No one

had ever seen such hospitality! He also offered mercy and forgiveness for anyone's sin and shared love with all."

You hear it, her choice of how to live her life echoing how she saw the life of Jesus Christ. The Rule of Life and Service of the Order of Saint Luke, for which the acronym OSL after Inga's name on the bulletin actually stands, by which Inga and Ron have sought to shape their lives, commits the followers of Jesus Christ to this way: "Through sacramental, prophetic, and pastoral ministries we turn in openness and love to the world. We identify with the whole community of humankind, especially those who live on the margins, and invite people to touch our lives as we touch theirs." Ron and Inga have exemplified the best of that rule in their relationships with others, and perhaps most admirably, most remarkably, in how they have related to one another in unending love and loyalty.

Inga finished that Palm Sunday sermon just a dozen years ago with this invitation: "Welcome, friends, to the Party of God! Welcome to the life, the hospitality, the mercy and just heart of God! The church, in Jesus' name, loves you and loves you for yourself. The church wants you to know your whole life was meant to be with those who celebrate life, love, and light! ... I don't know how you feel," she concluded on that Sunday just one Holy Week before Resurrection Day, "but I'll be ready for the Easter party at the end of this week. We will see the light and hope of Easter open up the tombs of darkness in this world! In spite of death itself, in spite of darkness and sin, Jesus will bring life back to us, by bringing himself back for us! Will you join us and know this Giver of Life? When you do, your life will never be the same, and the party never ends."

The party never ends. What is it really like where Inga now is and where we devoutly pray to someday be? To tell you the truth, the older I grow and the more opportunity I have had to reflect on that question, the less I find I can claim to know for sure the actual details of what lies beyond this life, the meaning of heaven with its metaphors of streets of gold and gates open as

long as it is light in a place of no night and tree of life growing on both sides of the river of water of life. But this I do believe with all my heart -- to borrow a phrase T. S. Eliot borrowed from Julian of Norwich – “All shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.” From the ashes of Ash Wednesday through the fire of Easter Sunday, the heart of the Christian story proclaims that no matter what happens in this life, even death itself, we are not without hope. The Church’s proclamation of hope echoes in verse from Tolkien’s *Fellowship of the Ring*:

*From the ashes a fire shall be woken,
A light from the shadows shall spring...*

What shall surely someday be when the grass grows green over our graves, or the ashes of our burnt flesh and bones are borne away on a breeze, is the wrapping up of all our stories in a completion that shall satisfy our souls because it completes God’s story being lived out through us. Could there ever be more reason to celebrate -- a more festive party?

As the Gospel of John reports about the God we have known in Jesus: “And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day” (6:39-40).

We thank God for the assurance that Inga, who in all her days among us looked to Jesus Christ and believed in him so fervently that his Spirit overflowed inexhaustibly through hers, is indeed at last beyond all mourning and crying and pain, in that place of light and love and laughter where all is indeed most well, FULLY ALIVE, ready to party eternally. AMEN

¹ Sermon preached by Inga at the Chinese Community Baptist Church, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Palm/Passion Sunday, 1998.

This sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Kate Harvey Jacobs on the occasion of the funeral of Rev. Inga Freyer-Nicholas, OSL, at Pilgrims’ United Church of Christ, Fruitland Park, Florida, 25 April 2010.

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Soli Deo Gloria