

BRITA KRISTINA STENDAHL * IN MEMORIUM * JAN. 10, 1925 – FEB. 11, 2016

(1 Corinthians 13: 11-12 and John 2: 1-11 * Homily by Thomas B. Chittick)

“But you have kept the good wine until now.” Jn. 2:10

and

“For now we see in a mirror, dimly...” 1 Cor. 13:12

Bronze or maybe pewter; metal in any case; metal hard hammered smooth. That’s what would have been a first century mirror. Imagine trying to make out your face in something that imprecise; shaving or putting on make-up. An apt metaphor by St. Paul to suggest faith’s perspective – seeing, yes, but seeing – dimly; by intimations.

Brita chose this text for today’s service – an invitation for us – to think together – seriously – about what we might be experiencing through her death and to hold our hope in the things of faith with honesty, humility, and curiosity. Curiosity. We stand at the rim of our own mortality whenever someone dear to us dies. Think.

That’s her introduction to the place she leads us to in the gospel reading for today. Again her choice. And surely with this choice she intended for us to have a good laugh. For when ever have you been to a funeral where the biblical story for reflection has been a story about a raucous party – the wedding at Cana – a three-day carnival of merriment?!

John’s gospel, the Book of Signs, is a record of incidents and stories through which Jesus’ followers “spotted” God: spotted the divine. Yes, I know the point of this story is the changing of water into wine. BUT for what and for whom? It was for a party for poor old Louie and Zelda who had run out of hooch! And there is Jesus helping them out. (Reminds me a little of Pope Francis: mercy.)

AND here is Brita saying – this celebration story is where faith has been vital for me.

So it was that she told her children to have a nice meal together on the day she died. To have a delicious cake to celebrate her heavenly birthday. Underline, delicious.

Remember Krista’s translation of the line, “I have come that you might have life and have it (not in abundance but have it) galore.” He liked the lavishness suggested in the word GALORE. I think he liked how it rolled off his tongue. She and he relished life. And like the disciples in the Book of Signs, saw signs of God in community, celebrations, and merry making. How their home on Trowbridge St, was filled with joyous living; great dinner parties, lovely art, and lively conversations.

But there is more. Jesus didn’t at first jump right in, you will notice. His mother had to prompt him. And as Brita would observe, “sometimes we have to help God out.”

That is a posture of faith she exemplified: sometimes we have to help God out.

And let me observe this, for which she might bristle at me for saying it. Notice in the story that Mary doesn't wait for Jesus to agree with her. She just goes to the steward and says imperiously, "Do what ever he tells you." Mary was a force to contend with, even for her son; the exemplary Jewish mother.

Who does that remind you of?

More than once I was at the end of a gentle but withering look from Brita!

Jesus resists but Mary persists.

And faith sometimes is in the interchange between the two.

The Bible is full of stories like that: scripture highlighting human agency; a kind of ethical partnership with the divine.

In Brita's case I think of her advocacy for education projects in Israel for Jews and Arabs together. Talk about persistence despite resistance!

Or think of the radical refurbishment of the shelter here at UniLu. In my view it all began with Brita being tired of how dirty things had gotten down stairs. And so she mobilized a pre-shelter-season-cleaning project including supplying new bedspreads for all the beds AND tucking them in. Talk about moving us off the dime! We were forced to see what needed doing big time. Of course most of the spreads walked out of here for more dire uses and situations. That didn't stop her in the least.

Don't be afraid to argue in faith with the church nor with Jesus. All of this of course is with the knowledge that what we see, and how we see it, is seen as in a mirror dimly.

Do you see in these texts how graciously, humorously, and wonderfully she has, at her funeral, brought us into a wider circle of faith? This is faith not as doctrines to ascribe to but faith as a style of living, a posture of being.

And now to this moment - this now - this sanctuary through whose doors she will never again pass.

Great-grandmother, grandmother, mother, sister, wife, friend, Grande Dame of Cambridge, follower of Jesus; Brita Kristina Stendahl; never again to walk through these doors.

And yet; and yet for her who once could only see as in a mirror dimly, now we are bold to hope that she is seeing face to face; knowing as one now fully known.

Think of that!

Think of that magnificent Swedish aristocratic beautiful face – now directly before the very face of God.

Oh my! Talk about a Cana like wedding feast: what a party for Brita. And it is for us to remember her whenever merriment is at hand and resistance is in demand. But for now, let us say in great gladness. Happy Birthday Brita,

Happy birthday!