

Scripture Reading for Jill's Celebration of Life

Fran: It was a joy to be one of Jill's many friends. I'm not a member of this church, but Jill was for me and my family the same as she was for many of you – a gifted pastor in our time of deepest sorrow and greatest joy. I visited with Jill often during her last chapter of life and these verses from Romans 12 are the scripture that I heard her quote most often, so they were selected to share here. I think they give us a glimpse of her own spiritual focus as she looked death in the eye. And they reveal the great importance that Jill put on church community, how we are called to forgive and take care of each other, and to do our best to live peaceably with all.

NRSV. Romans 12:12-18

¹² Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; persevere in prayer.¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints; provide hospitality to strangers.

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another; do not be arrogant, but give yourselves to humble tasks; do not claim to be wiser than you are.¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸ **If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.**

Fran Grace
Eulogy for Jill Kirchner-Rose
Celebration of her Life: August 19, 2023

FRAN: Others have spoken perfectly to some of the beautiful chapters of Jill's life. I'd like to share some of Jill's own reflections about her life – these are snippets from the conversations we had during her last year, when, at times, she labored to get words out.

Jill's Reflections:

I've come to realize that life's most valuable gifts are the ones right in front of me – ones that I used to take for granted until my illness:

A scented flower on my nightstand, a window that looks out on the garden, Karen's kiss as she says "goodnight," the sparkle in Daniella's eye as she bounces up on my bed and tells me something she's excited about, hearing Ace bark when someone's at the door, a letter from a friend who tells me how my life mattered to them...eating whip cream straight from the can!

I'm very grateful for all those who have loved and supported me and my family during the last year of my life: all the prayers, posts on KudosBoard, meals, blankets, visits, gift baskets, gift cards, flowers, phone calls, drive by hugs, play dates with Daniella, poems, books, songs – countless expressions of love and care.

I especially want Karen to know how much I love and appreciate her. I want her to have all the credit she deserves. She made a lot of sacrifices for me. It's not easy to be a pastor's wife – the church's needs seem always to be front and center – even our wedding cake, at my insistence, was made in the shape of a church! Yet she supported me in my long hours of ministry and being there for others... and her playful spirit day after day buoyed my own spirit - it was an absolute delight for me to come home at the end of a long day and see her and Daniella dancing ecstatically in the living room, and then sit down to a delicious homecooked meal. She is smart, witty, resourceful, compassionate – a beautiful and devoted wife. Karen has been by my side through the hardest year of my life. I can't imagine a bigger test of love than this last year! I couldn't have gotten through without her. And in it all, she never ceased to make me belly laugh...even in the wee hours of

the morning when we were in urgent care for the umpteenth time! I'm very sorry I'm leaving her with so much to handle, but I know she's immensely capable – and I pray that she'll be surrounded by loving and caring people. She deserves ALL the love that will come her way.

I want Daniella to know that I am thrilled she is my daughter. Some of my favorite memories are swimming with her in the pool, our weeks together at Pilgrim Pines camp, our trips to Kennedy Space Center, Lego Land, Knott's Berry Farm, and just being anywhere with her because she's so much fun to be with and I will never forget seeing those places through her eyes – she brought magic and wonder into my life. I see her joyful spirit, keen intuition, kind and compassionate heart, extraordinary creativity and talent. As many people know, I have a competitive streak (just ask the church Mahjong players!) and I like individual sports like tennis, but Daniella likes team sports because she loves to be with others. Whenever we played “school,” she was the teacher, and I was the student, and it was true – she taught me a lot! I'm so proud of her!

It's very hard for me that I won't be here as she grows up. I'd love to play soccer with her and be there for all the joys and sorrows of her life. I want to be here to help her with homework, to cheer her up when she gets down.... I pray she knows that I'll be cheering her on from another place and I'll always love her – even if she doesn't see me, I pray that she will feel my love for her, no matter what she is going through.

During the many months I've been bedbound, unable to walk, it's a huge comfort to lie here in bed and hear Karen sing, hear Daniella and Karen's laughter in the house, and hearing Daniella's feet patter in the hallway and run into my room with a little toy bear or gentle hug to comfort me... I love those family nights when Daniella and Karen and Ace cuddle up with me and just hang out. As I face the end of my physical life, I love and appreciate my family more than ever

Being a pastor was very fulfilling for me. I loved my job - I don't think many people can say that! I loved the people I got to work with, staff and church members and colleagues.

I felt called to ministry at a young age. When I was 15, I read a book, *Let Go and Let God*. I felt an overwhelming sense of God's unconditional love....and a calling to share it with others. I told my mother with confidence "I am going to be a minister." "Oh. That's nice, Honey. But it doesn't pay much. There are long hours. And: You have to deal with difficult people! Still: If it's your calling, then you have to do it."

Mom took me to church at RUCC, which made a huge difference in my youth. My favorite day was Sunday. For Mom too. She was always in such a good mood after going to church, she'd let me get whatever I wanted at Gerrard's Grocery store– Doritos AND Lemon Meringue pie!

I still miss my mother. She passed from life to Life when I was 25. I'm grateful I got to be with her at home during her last year, and help take care of her.

Because of my upbringing in RUCC, I've always believed that GOD is LOVE ...and that belief deepened even more during one of my first sabbaticals when I learned about the Sufi mystics. I enrolled in a summer class entitled "Rumi" at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley. One of his poems in particular awakened my heart to the beauty of this world,

With passion pray. With passion work. With passion make love. With passion eat and drink and dance and play. Why look like a dead fish in this ocean of God?

Then one night I wandered into a bookstore in Berkeley and came across the book, *Love Poems from God*, which included poems by Rumi and other mystics. Into the wee hours, as I read poem after poem, I felt transported to the heavens – as if literally levitating off the ground. This book became like a Bible to me – God's love in the form of poetry.

Also, during that same sabbatical, I traveled to Findhorn, Scotland, where I worked in a community garden. Findhorn is located on a wind-strewn peninsula. The soil is as worthless as sand on a beach and yet, the community of Findhorn grew 8-foot delphinium and 40-pound broccoli plants! What was their secret? The gardeners gave me this single instruction: "Pour your LOVE into the plants and the plants will feel that love."

I love and appreciate both churches I served. They taught me about Grace – that God's Grace covers ALL. And they taught me about True Community – how we take care of each other.

As a new minister, just starting out, I couldn't have been in a better church than the one in San Diego. A very meaningful part of my job was to mentor members of the youth group – I was able to give back some of the care and love that I had received growing up in a wonderful youth group (RUCC). It's a really great feeling to pass on whatever it is that you've been given.

FRAN: I'd like to pause for a moment and share a story that gives you an idea of how deep her impact was on the lives of young people from the San Diego church:

One of them, as soon as she heard Jill was on hospice, and at great financial sacrifice, flew all the way from her home in Scotland, just for a brief visit with Jill to say, "THANK YOU for changing my life."

I'll continue sharing from Jill now:

There are no words – for the joy I felt in “coming home” to RUCC. I learned more from them than I could ever teach! They give me a lot of credit but, truthfully, they were wonderful before I arrived, and they'll be wonderful after I'm gone. As a pastor, all I had to do was step aside and let THEM shine. They made me a better person. They believed in me. They helped me believe in myself. Sundays are still my favorite day of the week – not because of Doritos and Lemon Meringue pie – but because of the worship and the joy of being together. One of the hardest things for me to accept is that I won't ever get to be in the church again on a Sunday morning. There's nothing like seeing people smile because they found their place of belonging. I love hearing from people – don't get me wrong - they are so good to write, text and call me, but I miss being with them.

FRAN: I'm going to pause for a moment to introject a little story about the letters from people:

One day, when I visited Jill, she was sitting in bed with the letters from that day spread around her, little Ace curled up right next to her, and she asked me, “Why do people say they appreciate my humor? I'm not very funny!” She wasn't trying to be funny, but her question made me laugh! She just wasn't aware of how warm and infectious her smile and spirit were. Her smile made us feel like she was funny because WE couldn't help but smile when we saw HER smile. Few people are as “good-humored” as Jill. She was always looking for the good in others, even those she disagreed with.

FRAN: At one point near the end, I asked Jill – “What do you understand to be the meaning of your life?” She said:

Grace. I always wanted people to feel that no matter who you are, what you’ve done, you are loved and accepted. There’s NOTHING you can do to step out of God’s love. It is immense and unconditional. The church historically has been very judgmental. I’ve tried to be the opposite of that. When people shared their deep dark secrets with me, I hope I provided a space of love and grace. That is the key to my ministry and the meaning of my life. Love is the healer of us all. And God is Love.

FRAN: “How has the last year changed your view of ministry?”

I was always aware of Disability issues such as wheelchair ramps, but I didn’t personally understand what it’s like to be totally dependent on others. In these long hours reflecting on such things, I’ve been imagining what it would like to be at a church potluck and wonder, Will someone remember to bring me something to drink or eat? Will someone remember that I can’t move or go anywhere unless they help me? Being so dependent on others now, has made me aware of how every kindness matters.

Also, in my pastoral ministry visiting those on hospice, I wasn’t tuned into the dying person but rather to the family members who were grieving. I thought, “Oh well - The dying person will be just fine!” Now I’m on the other side. I AM the person on the deathbed. It’s a strange feeling. No one can understand until they’re facing their own death. When I first got the news, I felt at peace with death. “Oh okay, I’ve had a wonderful life – maybe it’s time for me to move on so that others can step in.” But then as it really hits you, it’s a process of coming to peace about letting go of each little attachment on its own... my hopes... my dreams... and each of my roles... for example, my time as a pastor is over – others will arrive whose gifts are needed for the seasons yet to come... I am learning to fully love and to fully let go...

As I transition from here, music helps me, and I think of the song I CAN ONLY IMAGINE by Amy Grant, and I think of my mother and her love that will welcome me.... I have faith in the communion of saints who will usher me into the arms of Divine Love. I think of Richard Blakely, the pastor of RUCC when I was a teenager, who was instrumental for me to understand that God’s love is unconditional... My brother Hank who just passed.... So many people whom I love who have passed on that I look forward to reuniting with soon.

My father and I were not close, but right before his death, he told me he loved me for the first time. And I experienced how healing can come in a single moment at death's door.

FRAN:

FINALLY: In one of my last visits with Jill, I noticed that she had underlined a poem from the book *Love Poems from God*— a poem by the 8th century Sufi saint, Rabia, who spent most of her life in slavery in Persia, and yet was famous for her faith that God's Love was present in everything that happened to her:

It acts like love – music.

It reaches toward the face, touches it, and tries to let you know
God's promise: that all will be okay.

It acts like love – music, and
Tells the feet, "You do not have to be so burdened."

My body is covered with wounds this world has made.

But I still longed to kiss God, even when God said:

"Could you also kiss the hand that caused
each scar,
for you will not find Me until
you do."

It does that – music – helps us

to forgive.

FAREWELL:

Jill dear: We give thanks for your life, we celebrate your immeasurable goodness, we pray to be loving stewards of all that you generously shared with us, and NOW... We let you go, knowing you are carried on angel's wings, abiding in God's everlasting love.