

Dolores Burnham Soderberg
July 12th, 1928 – September 23rd, 2019

a memorial address by the Rev. Michael Gladish
at the Washington New Church in Mitchellville, MD, Nov. 4th, 2019

“Well done, good and faithful servant;
you were faithful over a few things,
I will make you ruler over many things.
Enter into the joy of your lord.”
– Matthew 25:21

In the Lord’s Divine Providence nothing is ever lost; nothing is ever wasted. The time we spend in this natural world is all about preparation for eternal life in the spiritual world – not that it’s all about the future: in preparing for eternal life we are really learning how to live in the present, to fulfil our heavenly potential right here, right now, even as we are constrained by the challenges and limitations of this world. In fact, one of the important uses of these earthly limitations is to force the issue of determining what we value: we can’t do everything and we can’t be everywhere, even if we are in perfect health, so we have to decide what is important to us and make the most of the opportunities given to us.

Dolores Burnham Soderberg certainly made the most of her challenges and opportunities, flourishing as a devoted wife and mother, traveling with her husband, Allan, literally all over the world, and supporting the church where-ever they went as much as they both could manage.

By the way, in beginning with the reference to the faithful servant we should be clear that the idea of being a “ruler over many things” is not about being the king of the castle, or bossing other people around. The Lord specifically warned His disciples against this

(Matt. 16:25, 20:26, etc.). Rather it is about the empowerment to be useful to others, and to be fulfilled through that useful service. In that sense ruling over many things (note, things, not people) suggests using the lessons of practice and experience to support greater and greater uses – each of these, being multiplied, bringing greater and greater joy and fulfillment.

Dolores was born on July 12th, 1928, and so this year had turned 91. She was the oldest of three children of Ed and Elva Burnham, of Glenview, Illinois. Her sister, Phyllis (who married Garth Pitcairn, of Bryn Athyn, PA, and also just recently passed to the other world) was about a year younger and her brother, David, also now living in Bryn Athyn, is about 7 years younger. Now obviously a lot can happen in 91 years, so a little historical context may serve to show how far we've come in that time. For example, it was in 1928 that RCA demonstrated the first TV set in Schenectady, NY, *with a 1 ½ square inch monitor*. It was also the year Amelia Earhart flew solo across the Atlantic, Pitcairn Airlines (later to become Eastern Airlines) began regular service and the Pitcairn autogiro (prototype of our modern helicopters) first flew. It was the year Mussolini came to power in Italy, and Alexander Fleming discovered penicillin. Europe was in turmoil as various nations began lurching toward the Second World War, in the United States the great depression was fast approaching, and all that is just the beginning! So now, just imagine for a moment all the *amazing* events and discoveries Dolores observed in her lifetime.

Married in 1950 to Allan C. Soderberg, whom she met when she attended the Academy in Bryn Athyn, over a period of nearly 17 years Dolores brought 5 boys and 1 girl into this world: Justin in 1952, Todd in 1954, James in 1956, and Cynthia in 1958. Mark came along in 1961 and then after a long break Eric arrived in 1969. To her and Allan's credit every one of these people has gone on to enjoy successful, rewarding, even international careers, both in civilian

and in military service, in fields as diverse as economics, biology, technology, nursing and architecture. And now, of course, there are five grandchildren and three great-grandchildren in the family.

Thanks in part to the tumultuous times into which she was born, and the expansive engineering career her husband eventually enjoyed, Dolores was able to list 28 different places she lived in the course of her life, not counting the many overseas trips she made with Allan and the children. Beginning with a number of moves around “the Park” in Glenview, in the thick of the depression the family moved to Memphis, Tennessee, and then to Corpus Christi, where her father served as a naval officer during the Second World War. From there she attended “the Academy,” traveling by train each year at the height of the US involvement in the war. So she told the story of her father taking her to the station, scouring the ranks of soldiers, looking for a woman to sit with her until, finally finding one, she was on her way.

While Allan was in school, Dolores continued her studies, attending at least some courses at Northwestern University in Chicago and others at the college in Bryn Athyn. She also worked for awhile before marriage for the Kimberly-Clark corporation in Chicago, where she earned enough to be the first in her family to buy a brand new car for herself.

After marriage the couple went to Indiana where Allan attended Purdue University. Back again in Glenview Justin was born while Allan was working in Peru, South America, then they were off again to Iowa for graduate studies, then to work in New Jersey, then back to Iowa for more graduate studies culminating in a career move to Connecticut. It was while they were in Connecticut (with, by then, all 6 children) that they both got involved with the Masonic Order, he as a Master Mason and she as a member of the Eastern Star.

They both really appreciated these affiliations, which provided a sort of world-wide family connection for them anywhere they went.

There were other moves, notably to Raleigh, NC, and Arlington Heights, Illinois, and finally, in his retirement, to Fort Collins, CO, where they were able to be active in the developing New Church congregation in Boulder. The stint in Raleigh is especially worth mentioning because it was there, with only two children still at home, that Dolores herself went back to school, at Meredith College, where she received a degree in music, specializing in the organ! Wow! Who knew?! And how did we miss out at our little church here in Mitchellville?

OK, actually, we know. It wasn't just the long drive to get here, but unknown to many, in her early 50's she was diagnosed with breast cancer, which was aggressively treated, only to recur a year later and require more aggressive treatment. All this she endured stoically and for the most part alone, not wanting to trouble others with her ordeal – a real testament to her strength and courage! Sadly, though, after all that she really didn't have the strength to play the organ anymore.

Known affectionately to some as “Aunt Del,” throughout her life she was a gracious hostess at bridge parties and other special occasions at her home, and while she never much liked having pets in the house she was gracious about that, too, from time to time hosting hamsters, turtles, a bird, a dog and even a lizard – for the kids' sake. When they lived in New Jersey there were memorable trips to Coney Island for family fun. And on the employment side she held piano lessons at the house, did cafeteria work at a local school, and at one point conducted safety inspections for pleasure boats on behalf of the U.S. Coast Guard. She really was – and we presume will continue to be – quite a versatile and industrious woman.

Skipping ahead, when Allan died after a long bout with Alzheimers' disease, Dolores at first downsized to a condo in Boulder and then moved "here," to Stafford, Virginia, where she lived for 11 years with Cynthia and her husband, Royce, so near and yet so far that their church visits were hampered by the long commute. Still, they remained loyal, active members of the church, as many of us know from the communications we received from them over the years.

I had the pleasure of a special visit with Dolores about a year ago when we met for lunch at a favorite restaurant near her home. This followed a sequence of letters and emails in which she shared important milestones in her life, laying out in some detail all the different places she had lived. (Interestingly, the only things she *didn't* mention were her many talents and accomplishments.) Of course at that time she had no idea she would be making her final move so soon, but she was a woman who believed in being prepared. And so, in some ways, this is what this commemoration of her life is all about – *being prepared* – not just for this life but *for eternal life*.

Think back to our opening lines: "Well done, good and faithful servant...." The words are taken from the parable of the talents in Matthew (ch. 25). In that parable you may recall that the Lord, the Son of Man, was said to be like a man travelling to a far country, who gave each of three servants an amount of money to use while he was away. To one he gave five talents, to another two, and to the third one, "*to each according to his ability.*" The two who received the most used it wisely and doubled their master's money, but the one with only one *buried his talent* and so gained nothing – for which he was called a "wicked and lazy servant" on his master's return.

On one hand the parable raises all sorts of questions about fairness and, yes, *equity*, and we can't help feeling a little sorry for the "wicked" servant who was, we read, fearful of *losing* his talent. But the point of the story is that the master gave "to each according to

his ability,” not expecting any more or less than he knew they could do if they put their minds to it. And so it is for every one of us! The Lord has given us ALL talents – some more, some less, according to our ability, and it is critical that we not BURY them for fear of loss, but USE them in service to Him and to our neighbors. In fact, as Dolores clearly understood, it is the faithful use of whatever talents the Lord has given us that provides not only for our well-being but for our *eternal happiness!*

After all, heaven *is* a kingdom of uses. Who among us doesn't feel happy and fulfilled when we know that we are doing something really useful? And who doesn't feel miserable and *unfulfilled* when we realize we're *not* doing anything useful? Sure, it's fun to laze around and let everyone else do the work *for a while*, but the satisfaction soon wanes and when we feel *useless* we get grumpy. We lose our sense of value, purpose and self-esteem. Some even get suicidal!

Now as noted, Dolores was, to speak plainly, old, and so naturally many of those who knew her are also elderly. And a common complaint we hear from the elderly is that they just don't feel useful any more. So if that thought has ever crossed your minds, consider this. USE is not just what you do with your hands, with hammers and saws, pots and pans, sewing machines, computers or any other mechanical tools. To be useful is to be kind; it is to be compassionate, considerate and helpful *spiritually*, not just naturally. After all, when we're talking about real fulfillment we're talking about our *spiritual life*, and that is all about *love*, and *wisdom*, and the *quality of the relationships* we have with other people. And remember, ***when we pass from this world to the next that is all we're going to have!***

But the good news is that if we're living right and learning anything at all, the older we get, the wiser, more sympathetic and more

understanding we can be towards others. We don't have to work with physical tools of any kind to be useful in this way. All we have to do is pay attention, be thoughtful and considerate of others, and apply whatever wisdom we may have.

Part of this, by the way, is the *time* we have in later life for introspection, or self-examination. Throughout the busy-ness of life it is often hard to carve out the time and space needed to reflect deeply on who we are or what we really want in life. In fact, this can be so much so that when we are forced by circumstances to stop *and just sit and think* many of us find it frustrating and difficult to do! But it's important work – and I use the word, WORK deliberately, because it takes effort. ***And it is one of the most useful things we can do because unless we know what's going on within our own hearts and minds we can't really approach other people with appropriate humility and objectivity.*** We need to KNOW when we are motivated by ill-will or self-interest, and we need to discipline ourselves to set those things aside as much as possible so that the good we do has real integrity. Similarly we can look for the good we all get from the Lord, and have confidence in the inspiration He provides.

In summary, when we can't get out and do whatever we want, as hard as it is to adjust, it's important to think of this as a blessing in disguise, giving us the opportunity to address more spiritual uses. This is a major benefit of old age, if we will just recognize it and take advantage of it. Our friend, Dolores, clearly got this, and plainly did her part to approach all her friends and family members in this spirit.

So we can learn from her even today, as we reflect on her legacy: it's counter-intuitive but it's really true that ***the older we get the more useful we can be***, despite any of the physical limitations that may plague us. In fact, the *inability* to serve others physically can contribute to this, since it tends to erode our sense of *pride or*

entitlement and teach us to be gracious in accepting help from others – which in turn allows THEM to be useful towards US, building a heavenly community in a network of mutual love. We saw this in Dolores' last years among us, when she cheerfully accepted Royce and Cynthia's invitation to live with them, and in that situation continued to contribute in loving and significant ways to the life of the whole family here – right up until the day she died.

“Well done, good and faithful servant;
you were faithful over a few things,
I will make you ruler over many things.
Enter into the joy of your lord.”

Whenever we lose a friend or companion in this world there is – of course! – a sense of that loss in the daily lives of those left behind. But as we know this loss is not only temporary, it is in fact a mere appearance. For the person who has passed from this world to the next is still living and present with us in spirit, we just can't see her anymore through our physical eyes – nor can she see our physical world. But on the level of the will and understanding, affection and thought, that person is just as real as ever and just as connected in our minds as we allow her to be.

In this case we can think of Dolores awakening into full consciousness of the spiritual world and going eagerly to meet her husband, who, by the way, will have completely recovered from his Alzheimer's and regained all the energy and vigor of his youth – with the added benefits of all his life's learning and experience. No doubt he has been preparing for her, even as he has been secretly encouraging her these last years. Meanwhile, here in this world, let us join together this afternoon in celebration of a life well lived, and let us commit ourselves to the legacy of service that Dolores has provided for us. Let us learn from her example, prepare as she prepared, do the best we can with what we have been given, and never

let ourselves be so discouraged that we neglect our opportunities to bless others, and so to be blessed.

Amen.

Readings

Psalms 46:selections and 139:selections

Isaiah 43:1-5

Matthew 6:19-21, 25-33 and 25:14-21

Luke 12:4-7

Revelation 22:12-14

Heaven & Hell #39, 445, 461:selections, and #414

Conjugal Love #7:3-4 and 321:7