Marian Conning Memorial Homily
Jim Schaal
Danville Congregational Church
Saturday, June 30, 2018

Readings: Isaiah 58:6-12 and Matthew 5:1-12

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” As we gather today to remember Marian Conning, how we long for words of comfort. As Marian’s family, we give thanks for the many words you have offered in cards, visits, and calls. Comfort, consolation, condolence, compassion, sympathy: all your words remind us, right down to their Greek and Latin roots, that we are in this life together and we need not suffer our sorrows alone. And so it is fitting that we should gather to remember Marian, who gathered so many in worship and in community.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” When Jesus spoke these words, as recorded in the Gospel according to Matthew, his disciples too were gathered. Many had much to mourn. To follow Jesus up that mountain, some had left their boats behind and their livelihoods by the lakeshore. Others had traveled far from their families and their villages. In the crowds below were widows and orphans, lepers and prostitutes, the lame and the blind—all outcasts, all suffering loss and crying lament. To all these people, wounded and waiting, Jesus spoke of God’s grace for the grieving: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”

Yet even as we gather to grieve her death, we come also to celebrate Marian’s life. Marian was a woman of bold action and calm reflection, of outward passion and inward peace, of uncommon grit and constant grace. Today we’ll share many stories of the ways she touched our lives. Some stories will make us cry. And some will recall her sharp wit. Thus in the Gospel according to Luke, Jesus said: “Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.”

Friends, I’ve struggled so to write this homily. It would be hard enough to give an adequate eulogy. There are not enough verbs in my vocabulary to voice all that Marian gave to her family. There are not superlatives sufficient to sum up her service to her churches, her communities, and her Creator. But at a memorial service like this, the homily is supposed to be different from the eulogy. The eulogy is meant to offer praise for the dead, while the homily is meant to offer hope to the living.

Yet when we reflect on Marian’s life, it’s difficult to draw that distinction. When a life is so wholly devoted to God, a soul so fully suffused by the Holy Spirit, a journey so daily directed by discipleship in Christ—then encomium becomes evangel. The good words we speak of Marian’s life become part of the Good News we share of God’s love.

In her interfaith work and her multicultural ministry, there was such hope. In her social justice advocacy and her environmental activism, there was such good news. In her steadfast love for us—whether as mother or grandmother, spouse or sister, friend or neighbor, pastor or teacher—there was such gospel. To know Marian was to hear the wisdom of the biblical witness, to see the power of the prophetic imagination, to taste the formative food of sacramental community, to touch the transformative possibilities of truth and grace. When our good words about Marian convey so much of God’s Good News, what can homily add to eulogy?
“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” For Marian, the Sermon on the Mount was a way of life. The Beatitudes were her attitudes of being. In 2005, when she returned to the First Congregational Church of Berkeley for the baptism of her first grandchild, she wrote:

This church is my mother: she loved me and raised me and taught me the stories of Jesus I still love to hear. I know all of her back-stairs shortcuts and secret passages. I was married here, our children were baptized here, my parents and grandparents were all buried from here…and now we’re here for the baptism of our grandson Jake, whose parents were also married here…I cannot find words to say what it means to raise a child in a church like this—it is a priceless gift.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” In her late thirties, Marian felt a call to ministry that led her to a more radical and prophetic faith. At the Pacific School of Religion, she was profoundly influenced by liberation theology and feminist biblical scholarship. Although she excelled in her studies and earned the Master of Divinity degree, Marian chose not to seek ordination. She felt that as a lay leader she could be clearer in her vocation, perhaps purer in her heart. Her models of ministry were comunidades de base, Catholic Worker houses, and above all the house churches in the Acts of the Apostles. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” To his own Jewish people, subjugated and impoverished by the Roman Empire, Jesus spoke of another kingdom. This was the kingdom of heaven, the reign of God’s love. This was not some distant realm set in some far future. The kingdom of heaven, Jesus proclaimed, is here and now, wherever and whenever we live in beloved community. It was such community that Marian sought to build.

Marian took no vow of poverty. But she had no sentimental attachment to stuff. When their garage in Vacaville was flooded and many possessions lost, Mom posted on the wall another passage from the Sermon on the Mount: “Do not store up your treasures on earth…but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

Instead, Marian practiced a Christian commitment to simple living that enabled her to focus on generosity and hospitality. Selling their home in Berkeley and taking early retirement, she and her husband Keith moved to Vacaville in 1999 to start what she called “a first-century house church for the twenty-first century.” As pastor of Amistad United Church of Christ, she opened their home as a sanctuary, she took no salary, and she convinced their tiny congregation to tithe fifty percent of their offerings to local and global mission. Every Friday evening, she served a simple supper, broke the bread and poured the wine, and led the community in prayer and discussion after the meal. And Keith, bless his patient heart, joined in this generosity and gave his part. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.” As a New Testament scholar, Marian knew that dikaiosune, the Greek word commonly translated as “righteousness,” also means “justice.” More than anyone else I have known, Marian hungered and thirsted for justice: social, economic, racial, gender, environmental, and interreligious justice. Her hunger came from a tender empathy for the oppressed, her thirst from a trenchant critique of the systemic structures of oppression. The Gospel, as she saw it, was meant equally to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable.
At the First Congregational Church of Berkeley, Marian served as the Sunday School director and volunteered in a ministry with the homeless and the mentally ill. She took one of the participants in to live in the cottage behind their house, where she and Keith had previously housed two Vietnamese refugee families. Then she ventured further to join South Berkeley Community Church. There she supported a feeding ministry for the homeless, started programs for neighborhood youth, and preached when the congregation could not afford to pay a pastor. She became a godmother and mentor to several children of that church, and she took as much delight in them as in her own children. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.”

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” Marian was not, by any measure, meek. No: she was courageous when others cowered, forthright when others feared to speak. But she understood that when Jesus spoke of “the meek,” he meant the disempowered, the disenfranchised, the dispossessed. She knew that as a teacher and prophet and healer, Jesus turned the conventional wisdom of the social order on its head. “You have heard it said...” he taught, “but I say...” This way of Jesus appealed to Marian’s contrarian impulses and her slyly subversive sense of humor. More importantly, it spoke to her unshakeable conviction of God’s redemptive power for the powerless and her unfolding experience of Christ’s incarnation as God with us and God for us.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus called to the downtrodden and lifted them up in blessing. So with her strong and sometimes stubborn voice, Marian advocated on behalf of many whose voices have been silenced or suppressed: women, LGBT youth and queer folk, people of color, war refugees, undocumented immigrants, and more. Before she spoke out, she was always careful to listen and learn from those she championed.

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” Marian spoke too on behalf of the earth, which she held sacred as God’s creation. Wherever she walked, on city streets or in national parks, she carried a bag and picked up litter. When the last open space between Vacaville and Fairfield was threatened by suburban sprawl, she organized the Friends of Lagoon Valley to prevent development and preserve that place as a wildlife habitat. If the meek were to inherit the earth, Marian and Keith were determined that the land would not be paved over, the waters polluted, or the creatures imperiled. “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.” To Samaritans and Syrophoenicians and all sorts of strangers, Jesus spoke of a kingdom in which all could dwell in peace, no matter their ethnicity or nationality. Even to the occupiers and collaborators, to Roman centurions and Herod’s tax collectors, Jesus spoke of a better way: “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.”

For Marian, the Beatitudes were a clarion call to cross-cultural dialogue. Having studied anthropology at UC Berkeley, she cherished human diversity as a gift from God. She loved to engage other cultures as she traveled in Cuba, Mexico, Japan, and the Philippines. She enjoyed conversing in Spanish and often chose hymns in other languages. On Facebook, she made friends all around the world, many of whom have written us since her death. As a theologian, she read and wrote extensively about enculturation and contextualization—seminary speak for meeting people where they are and making meaning in their own setting.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.” In the wake of 9/11, when she saw her Muslim neighbors persecuted as if they were terrorists or traitors, Marian reached
Out to the Islamic community. In 2017, at age 75, she began to learn Arabic as an act of solidarity and resistance to the travel ban. The week that she died, she had planned to participate in an interfaith gathering in Pleasanton. As a peacemaker, she saw all people—regardless of creed or color—as children of God. It would have broken her heart this month to see the travel ban upheld by the Supreme Court, or to see children separated from their parents at the border. As she often pointed out, there is a moral claim and a political principle at stake when we say “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.”

Over the last two decades, Marian set out to visit nearly all the Northern California congregations of the United Church of Christ. She kept journals of her “Sunday Sojourns” and shared them with people she met there. In 2006 here at Danville Congregational Church, she noted that you sang one of her favorite Taizé chants:

Come and fill our hearts with your peace. You alone, O God, are holy.
Come and fill our hearts with your peace. Alleluia.

In 2009, preaching at St. Paul’s United Methodist Church in Vacaville, Marian said:

I told you once that when you invite me to preach, I will alternate between “come-follow-Jesus” sermons and “go-into-the world” sermons. “Come” and “go” are the heartbeat of Christian community—the “lub-dub, lub-dub” of our life together in Christ. As anyone knows who has watched a hospital heart monitor, or listened through a stethoscope—or (like me) experienced heart palpitations and arrhythmias—you just don’t want to have the “lub” without a “dub.” I believe the same is true of Christian communities...The diastole of “come”—the filling of our hearts’ chambers, come together, come to church, come sing, come follow Jesus—is followed by the systole of “go”—the pumping of our hearts’ blood through the Body of Christ and out into the world, go and preach the gospel, go and feed the naked and visit the sick and those in prison.

If Marian were here among us today, she would sing a second verse:

Go and fill the world with God’s peace. For God through Christ has called us.
Go and fill the world with God’s peace. Alleluia.

Sometime on the night of Memorial Day 2018, Marian’s own heart—that great heart so full of peace and so fierce in love—stopped beating at last. She was serenely at rest on the sofa where she read in the evenings. Her glasses were folded neatly on top of the Gospel of Trees, a poignant memoir of a young woman growing up in an agricultural mission in Haiti. Just beyond, through the open window, was the small garden that she tended in Vineyard Estates.

In the beating heart of the Body of Christ, Marian Gail Barr Conning came and followed Jesus. From the church, she went out to serve in the world. In the words of the Hebrew prophet Isaiah, this was the fast that she chose: to feed the hungry, to house the homeless, to loose the bonds of injustice, to satisfy the needs of the afflicted. As much as any one person could, she raised up the foundations of many generations.

Blessed now is Marian, for in the paradise of God’s presence she shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

Blessed also are we who knew her, for this day our light shall rise in the darkness, our gloom shall be like the noonday sun, and our healing shall surely come. Amen.
Isaiah 58:6-12
Is not this the fast that I choose:
  to loose the bonds of injustice,
  to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
  and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
  and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
  and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
  and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
  the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard.
Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
  you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.
If you remove the yoke from among you,
  the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
if you offer your food to the hungry
  and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
  and your gloom be like the noonday.
The Lord will guide you continually,
  and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
  like a spring of water,
 whose waters never fail.
Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
  you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
  the restorer of streets to live in.

Matthew 5:1-12
When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to
him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:
“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted. “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. “Blessed are those
who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. “Blessed are the merciful, for they
will receive mercy. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. “Blessed are the
peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. “Blessed are those who are persecuted for
righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are you when people revile you
and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad,
for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were
before you.