

God's Grace: My Experience

Shared by Allen Kraus

Sunday, March 26 at Plymouth Church Worship Service



I'm going to talk about two people this morning.

The first was my grandmother – we called her Fuller.

She was short and round and wore thick glasses that set her eyes back like brown beads. She was “local” but aware, up on politics, cocksure even when she knew little about a subject, and fearless.

She stood by my grandfather – the town's mayor/jailer at the time – when he faced down a lynch mob coming after a black man who worked on the Blue Ridge Parkway construction.

She lost her husband early, never remarried, never even dated again.

She was left with little more than social security and a small postal service pension. She worked retail and used Food Stamps at times.

She had reason to be weary and disconnected, but she wasn't.

She was a passionate New Deal Democrat in a hopelessly Republican region. She ran for County office once – a Democrat and a woman.

She taught Bible class her whole life – I remember her Upper Rooms. She lived those lessons. Once I watched her deflect with quiet kindness the proselytizing of a group of patched-skirt Jesus freaks.

She taught me to fish and cook and to love the mountains. She let me have it at times – cursing me when I gave up my fishing hole to a stranger who asked where I caught my trout.

She loved pimento cheese sandwiches, a glass of Bourbon, Tar Heel basketball, and fishing the Linville River amidst bears and rattlesnakes.

When she could no longer drive, she'd call a young friend and say: "Suzy, I have a hair appointment in Asheville Tuesday, I want you to take me." "Sure thing", Suzy would say. To save money, she'd bake a "better-than-sex" cake for the tip, and her hairdresser loved it.

She was a force: undeterred, driven by conviction, proud and humble and funny.

She always stood on the hill by her house when I got in my car after a visit – her glasses off, tears in her eyes, bringing tears to mine for miles to come.

She died after an illness when she was 86. I prayed hard for her to live. But she died and I cried like I'd never cried before – sobbed and shook.

Looking back, I can see God's love and lessons coursing through Fuller, and I feel how she poured this love and learning into me – an uncommon gift. I really didn't lose her after all.

The woman who comforted me the night Fuller died was her daughter, my mother, Kathryn.

As Brett and Liz remind us, it's easy to believe, hard to act. Mom acted.

Like Fuller, she was lonely much of her life – an only child, an unrequited wife, a crusader. She suffered depression and migraines and, eventually, early-onset dementia.

She was a music lover and educator, a band teacher, church choir leader. In ways that matter, she was ahead of her church.

She and a handful of others – black and white – integrated our town. They walked door to door asking stores, restaurants, motels and other businesses to serve African Americans. The law was set by Brown v. Board of Ed, but Mom and her colleagues brought it to life.

Mom joined Kentucky's Human Rights Commission, helped write the South's first open housing laws, and fought for other causes. She became a state Democratic leader.

It was hard for her. She wasn't popular in Bardstown. And it wasn't always easy being her kid.

We were in Myrtle Beach once when I was little and that town was still redneck. It was a beautiful, hot day. Everybody was on the beach. A group of black families came down and every white person left the beach – except one. Mom greeted the families, joined them in the water. I went to the motel balcony and watched and listened as people – including the motel manager – cursed her. I feared for her, for us and for the black families.

That night, I pulled the plugs on all the ice makers in the motel, flooding the balconies. Only years later did I realize why I did that.

Mom walked alone much of the time, unbent and righteous. God coursed through her, like Fuller. She shared God's lessons with me and my sisters through brave, just acts – works that awe and challenge me today.