

NANCY'S YURT
LENTEN DEVOTIONAL
APRIL 7, 2025



In August of 2022, First Presbyterian lost a friend, a member, a teacher, a true source of joy, Nancy Blomn Kipnis. Nancy's passing was compounded in tragedy by her age, she was 52. She lost her battle with cancer and left behind a husband of 26 years, Jeff, as well as two children, one just finishing high school, Jenna, and the other, Jack, in the middle of college.

From time to time, I have lost a parishioner whose life is a true inspiration, a source of strength, and Nancy was one. I believe it was this sense of loss and complicated grief that gave rise to the effort to remember Nancy by raising the funds to dedicate a building after her at a nearby camp, Camp Johnsonburg. In the end the congregation raised \$25,000 so a "yurt" could be named in her honor.

Recently I discovered that the plans for four small yurts was changed to one large one. The camp director came and offered a rationale and was concerned that such a change would not sit well. As we talked though I kept hearing and imagining how Nancy would have responded. "I don't care," seemed close to what she might have said. Small yurt, big yurt. Doesn't matter. What was key was the act of remembering her, making a gift in her memory.

Getting ready to write this vignette about the act of memorializing her life and honoring her memory, I reread her eulogy. Reading it through I was shocked. It was a homily about memory, about living memory, and how memories come to us. Hence, what I offer now is not so much a vignette on memorials but the eulogy itself. It seemed fitting to have Nancy's life in the midst of this study. For in many ways, the need to remember people felt in losing her, the

words offered in the moment of her passing to relieve the grief felt in her passing are a memorial. We were building a memorial with word and music.

Quite often at the end of a funeral I will charge those who have gathered to be a living eulogy. Give what you received; love as you were loved; care as you have been cared for. Be a living eulogy. This too is a kind of debt we owe.

Homily Offered at the Funeral of Nancy Blomn Kipnis

I was at the synagogue about a month ago. It was the farewell shabbat service for Rabbi Eric Rosin. Eric was very concerned after the service because it lasted three hours and no one had told me it would last three hours. But, as I told him, no worries. I loved it.

Probably the best moment was the special Kaddish that is offered for the one's we have lost on the anniversary of their death. Neve Shalom invites members not only to call out their name, but to also share a memory.

Each person who spoke gave a mini-eulogy, a tribute, a fond memory. Some were very recent and you could see how raw the emotions were. Some were not so recent but yet poignant. One not so recent loss was remembered by a man who gave a tribute to his father who was killed in the late 1930s when he himself was only a small boy. The man recounted his father's life and gave details of his character and beliefs. And as he spoke the presence of a man gone more than 80 years came and dwelt with us.

In the last few days this prayer and tribute keep hanging around my heart. The beauty of the long-held memory, the way we hold on to our treasures and also offer them in return.

There is a great pressure when someone dies to conjure all of our memories. Often times when I meet with families it is as if there is an obligation to gather what could never be contained except in a heart and put them down in writing or speak them for all to hear. An impossible task.

There is something else I saw that day in the synagogue, something I never appreciated until I heard the kaddish of the old man speaking of his long-deceased father. What I saw was this: memories come to us, more often than not, in their own time, almost with a life of their own. What if there are memories we are not ready to share, memories too dear to enter our grief, too lovely to be spoken in a public space?

As I looked over my notes for the service today, what I wanted to say first was this: there are so many homilies in this room, so many eulogies in this room, so many tributes that could be offered. Not just memories of parents and siblings, Jeff, Jack and Jenna, but cousins and nephews and nieces and aunts and uncles and in laws; co-workers and church members, scouts and neighbors and students. Everyone here, I would imagine, has a memory, if not a storehouse of memories, that steels the heart and breaks the heart at the same time.

A couple memories that helped me this week were the first time I met Nancy and then a moment in a session meeting. The first time I met Nancy I was confused. Nancy was talking really, really fast. Lots of time people talk really fast when they are overwhelmed with excitement, but our conversation was not about such; or people talk really fast when they are mad and they need to rant and get everything out. The other option for talking fast is fear. None of these were the nature of the conversation. We were just talking. So I am trying to

figure out is something wrong, is something fantastic, is something dire. But none of these were true.

In the weeks, months, years to come I learned to see the urgency in her voice was not about circumstances; the urgency in her voice was her joy, her love and drive and determination. This came from her heart. For me, this changed everything. Here was transparency; here was her heart. Nancy wasn't coy.

The other memory was a board meeting where we were discussing the addition to our food pantry. The addition was just a bit too close to the Presbyterian Women's closet. A closet containing all the plates, cups, trim, decorations, vases, table clothes, nick knacks, books, candles, just about every aspect of decoration and design known to humankind. The library of congress and the Smithsonian have lesser collections than the presbyterian women's closet. Hence her concern.

Twice I assured her. Nancy we are not taking away the closet; we are not moving the closet; we are not making the closet smaller. But I could tell she wasn't convinced, and she brought it up again. So, it was a bit naughty, but I made sure for the rest of the meeting to suggest, now having thought about the closet, it could be moved. Kaboom. Do the presbyterian women really need a closet? Kaboom. It was the most fun I have had a session meeting in long time. Each time Nancy headed into the breech. No one was taking that closet!

And there are more. Lots more. I can't even imagine how many Nancy stories there are in this room. Family stories about group photos, birthdays replete with matching t-shirts, that she put up a second Christmas tree each year decorated only with Gone with the Wind ornaments. Bible studies and coffee and neighbors. Nancy drew people in.

In the lesson from Luke there is an intriguing image of Nancy.

I wish there was a way to recount and embody her zeal to learn and know, to study about her faith and teach children. She was a Mary. She was in the studies, leading the studies, creating the groups to study. How many years did she teach fifth and sixth grade Sunday school? How many days did she start the morning in devotion with her Jack and Jenna. In our reading this is Mary, the woman who wants to learn.

Yet, like my first encounter with her, Nancy is confusing. She is also a Martha. She did the studies, taught the studies, and then ran the snacks, did the decorations, served on the boards, the committees, organized the efforts. In all the churches I have pastored, I have met a lot of Marys; I have met even more Marthas. Yet, very few people have I met who were both. She is both Mary and Martha in the story, ready to learn and ready to work.

What surprises me most, though, about how unique Nancy was, what surprises me is that I am not surprised. Many times when people die and I meet with family and friends, I learn things that are surprising. A quiet hobby. A silent anguish. A hard patch in childhood. An award. There were certainly things I learned about Nancy as her life slipped away, but I never felt surprised. That children had matching t-shirts at a themed birthday party for extended family. Didn't know about the t-shirts. But it doesn't surprise me. Different pieces and part of her were new to me, but not unthinkable.

I knew a lot about Nancy in short time. And it wasn't because she talked at lightening speed or that I am perceptive. I knew her because she was transparent; if you knew Nancy, you knew her heart. And you were better for it.

In just a moment, Helen and Michele will offer tributes to Nancy. And this is good and right and wonderful. But what is so lovely in this moment is that so could you and you and you. Can I see a show of hands? I am not asking you to speak. Can I see a show of hands of those here who have a cherished story of Nancy? A moment you treasure? A moment of laughter or tears. Who here carries Nancy's memory in your heart?

Lots of people are memorable. But I have a theory about Nancy's memory. What I hold in my heart is her urgent joy, the transparent desire for people to be happy, for things to be given away, for people to feel remembered and loved. It was as if the world needed to be loved, to be cared for, to be given a commemorative t-shirt. With so much to love, the urgency of her joy makes sense.

Just for fun I went and stared into the presbyterian women's closet. I did so to find the strength to do what she did. True. I will never be Nancy. I am too tall. And you are the same. We can't be Nancy no matter our height. But what if we seek to find the urgency of joy, the unbridled desire to bring happiness to others? We may never match her skill or breadth of impact, but we can let our hearts be known. We can be compelled to offer our love, our joy, with a sense of urgency. I believe such a path would be a wonderful way to remember her—an urgent joy. Amen.