

Introduction

It was a Friday morning in March of 2019, and once again I had a decision to make. Working on the book project was only possible during the two hours each morning when our youngest daughter was at preschool, and on Fridays I had to choose: should I use those two hours for writing, or should I attend the Bible study group and possibly get more material? This time, it came down to taking care of my heart, which was weary from a rough week with one of our children and beginning to show some of the telltale signs of hardening.

I felt a great need to immerse myself in the warmth and energy of these women whose prayers and hopefulness were strong enough to hold me up above the water. Though I wasn't part of their original group, who years ago called themselves the Mermaids because of their standing date at one woman's backyard pool in the summertime, over the past few years they had welcomed me into their circle of friendship in a way I had not imagined. Despite the generational gap between us I had come to see them not just as the subjects of my book but as spiritual companions and friends.

At the start of the book project, when I began dropping in occasionally at their Friday morning meetings, it was with the mentality of a journalist. I observed the various personalities and how they interacted, constantly taking mental notes which I hurried to scribble down on a notepad after coming home. But the undercurrent of love in this group was so strong that I couldn't help but be drawn in, and even before a year had passed I knew a change had taken place. While I was still conducting interviews and making note of things that were said in the meetings that would fit well into someone's chapter, it was no longer just as an observer looking in. I had become a member of the circle, sharing in that exchange of energy which was always

coursing through it like in a grove of aspens joined at the roots. If I had been absent for several weeks, the women greeted me with genuine joy and said they'd missed me; when birthdays came around I was asked to sign cards and even received one of my own. When I hosted at my house for the first time, we took a group photo, one I now treasure because it's the only photo I have of Kate.

It was easy to forget that Kate had terminal brain cancer because even in that final year, when both the pain and the exhaustion had worsened, she was still there every Friday, still making her trademark spitfire comments and jokes mixed with nuggets of spiritual wisdom. Underneath all of that, however, she was very aware that her death might be near, and looking back on that day I can see that she wanted to help the rest of us prepare for it.

As I entered the kitchen that day, making a beeline for the elegant black carafe I knew would be waiting on the back counter—I've learned by now which of the hostesses brew their coffee strong enough for my liking—Maureen was showing the others a small album of photos from her granddaughter's baptism. The five women gathered around her ooh'ed and ahh'ed in between mouthfuls of poppy seed cake. I had arrived just in time to also hear the good news that one woman's son, for whose mysterious medical symptoms we had all been praying, had tested negative for the degenerative nerve disease known as ALS. Everyone erupted into loud rejoicing, including me, and already I was glad I'd chosen to come that day. Little did I know what a priceless experience was still in store.

We made our way into the dining room and sat down around the artfully set cherry wood table, where the chatting continued until Hannah turned to look at the grandfather clock in the corner and announced that it was time to begin. Everyone grew quiet and looked at Kate,

waiting for her to take out her well-worn copy of the opening prayer. Over the past few years it has become Kate's job to start each meeting with this prayer, one she learned from her lay Cistercian community, and most of us now keep a copy of it taped into the inside cover of our Bibles. What Kate wanted to share with us that morning, however, was something quite different.

"I've written my obituary," she announced, "and I'd like to read it to you."

The energy in the room immediately changed, as each woman seemed to withdraw into her inner thoughts the way a turtle pulls back into its shell. I cannot speak to what the others were feeling, but as for myself, I was stunned. This was uncharted territory.

My experience with death at that point was very limited. My parents and I had moved to the United States from Sweden when I was very young, and we saw my grandparents and other relatives only once every few years. I had never even been to a funeral, much less walked alongside someone during that final stretch of their journey as I was being invited to do through this group.

Knowing that these women had been meeting every week for more than a decade, and in many cases been friends for much longer, I felt torn in that moment between deep gratitude for being included and a desire to disappear under my chair. I felt suddenly like an impostor, someone who had not earned the right to share in this intimate moment of friendship.

On at the wall to my right, my eyes fell on the small but striking painting of the Last Supper—another little group of friends gathered around a table with someone about to die. It struck me that some of Christ's disciples might have had similar feelings to mine when His talk of betrayal and death suddenly turned their lively Passover feast into a different kind of gathering

altogether. Something sorrowful, intimate and holy. Perhaps they too felt unworthy to share in such a moment. Yet, worthy or not, there they were, and so was I. Cradling the warm coffee mug in my hands, I fixed my eyes on the steam which rose like thin wisps of incense smoke as Kate began to read.

The obituary began with humor, as we'd all expected it would: "There was a raging blizzard the night Kate was born, and her parents couldn't get to the hospital. She hasn't liked winter since." In her usual self-deprecating way, she described herself as someone who "found almost everything interesting but was good at practically nothing." Imagining that she would take her last breath not in a hospital bed but at Wrigley Field watching her beloved Chicago Cubs clinch an extra-innings World Series win, she wrote: "Her death...was just how she would have wished. She died very happy."

When Kate finished reading, some of the others expressed surprise at learning she had volunteered for many years at the local animal shelter taking care of cats. Out of humility, she had never mentioned this before. Heads nodded emphatically around the table when someone suggested that she include her own cats as her survivors at the end of the obituary. A few people began pointing out other things she had left out, such as her love for poetry and opera. I listened, delighted, as more bits and pieces of her life floated up into view that had not surfaced in our interviews.

"Card shark!" one woman shouted, and they all laughed uproariously. And so I learned that this group of ladies who pray together in the mornings also have on occasion met at night to play cards and drink wine. "We need to do that again soon!" Felicity said. "It has been *way* too

long.” More laughter rang out when they recalled the time Kate was surprised to hear some salty language from “prim and proper” Maureen during a card game.

The conversation moved to obituaries in general and what they each would write in theirs. It was agreed that Maureen’s had to include the ladies’ poetry nights she hosts in her home, and that Hannah’s should say she introduced 10,000 people in Iowa City to each other—a bit of an exaggeration, but with a kernel of truth. “Everyone is connected through Hannah,” a frequently heard comment among these ladies, was said once again that day and affirmed with many “Mmm-hmms” and knowing chuckles.

Then Kate shared that a friend of hers had died earlier that week, someone who had been going through the same cancer treatments as herself and taking the same regimen of medications. Kate often comes across as unshakable, but now for the first time I heard her use the word *afraid*. She said that going to her friend’s funeral showed her how near her own death might be. Again it was as if a shadow settled over the room, and the lively chatter faded gently down into a reverent silence. Those seated closest to Kate wordlessly rubbed her back or put a hand on her arm, while the rest of us smiled sadly; there was nothing to say.

We moved on to the opening prayer, and Felicity began to read aloud from chapter three of Scott Hahn’s *The Lamb’s Supper*. During the four years since I joined the group, we’ve gone through many parts of the Bible: the five books of the Pentateuch—a challenge for all of us and a source of much groaning and many jokes—two of the four Gospels, some lesser known books like Judith and Tobit, and more. Sometimes the group takes a break from the Bible itself, which they have gone through in its entirety many times over by now, and instead reads an encyclical from one of the Popes or a devotional book like this one.

Whatever the reading material, the format of the Friday meetings is always the same. A volunteer reads one chapter of the text aloud, without stopping, and then we discuss it. There is no facilitator; people simply chime in to make comments or ask questions, until someone—usually Hannah—reins us in from the inevitable tangent trails we’ve wandered onto and points out that it’s almost 11:00, time for the closing prayer.

Instead of simply reciting a quick “Hail Mary” or “Our Father” together to end their meeting, as in most Catholic groups I have been part of, these ladies close with a more spontaneous—and more lengthy—kind of prayer. Each one takes a turn thanking God aloud for some personal blessings and offering up a few petitions, often layered with explanations and side notes for the benefit of the group. For the first year or so, I struggled with impatience and restlessness during the closing prayer; all I could think about was wanting to get home and squeeze in a short period of writing before my child-free morning ended. Truth be told, there were times when I left early just so I could skip that part of the meeting.

As time went on, though, I grew to love the closing prayer time and to see it as the glue binding this lovely little community together. It is a time of honest vulnerability and also an equalizer of sorts. Each person, whether loud and funny like Felicity or quiet and understated like Emily, has a turn to share about what’s going on in her life while the others simply listen, with none of the lively interruptions that pepper the rest of our conversations.

Praying in this way forces me to lay my own issues aside and practice tuning in to the needs of others. For Hannah, this is one of the reasons why faith-based friendships are so important. “We all experience suffering; it’s part of our journey on earth,” she wrote as part of the notes she gave me before our first interview. She went on to say that instead of always

looking inward, focused on our own situation, we must learn to “look around, accompany others in *their* time of trial,” which is what the women in this group do. Each of them has at some point been the recipient of small gestures of love in time of need, whether it’s Hannah surprising Lisa with an orchid on her doorstep during a family crisis, or Felicity coming over to feed Kate’s cats when she’s too sick to get up. When my mother died they surprised me with beautiful handwritten notes, homemade chocolate chip cookies, and a bouquet of flowers in a small, elegant purple vase. Those acts of kindness all had their roots in the weekly practice of listening to and praying for one another during the meetings.

When it was her turn during the closing prayer that day, Kate asked for safe travels for her drive to Des Moines to visit her 90-year-old mother, then paused for a moment, sighed and said, “Lord, I just can’t remember what else. I haven’t been firing on all cylinders lately, and it bothers me. *A lot.*” Her growing forgetfulness was a constant source of frustration and embarrassment. At the beginning of that day’s meeting she had joked that she didn’t know which was worse: the Iowa Hawkeyes losing to a lower-ranked team in the basketball playoffs, or the fact that she had to leave her house unlocked when she went to Bible study because she didn’t know where her keys were.

As Kate went through her somewhat jumbled prayer intentions, the interruption of the grandfather clock caused her to fall silent, and many of us opened our eyes. Just then the sun began to emerge from behind a cloud, and light sifted into the room through the windows like a slow intake of breath. No one said a word; only the clock continued calling out its eleven strokes.

In that moment it felt as though we were in a beautifully arranged still life painting, the kind whose most striking element is the light. Maureen, ever the elegant hostess, had set the table with a hunter green cloth, tall taper candles in dark mahogany candlesticks, and a vase of magenta-red lilies. Against the steady, deep tones of the clock which sounded like monastery bells, the crescendo of sunlight that had suddenly illuminated the room seemed momentous and full of hope, like a revelation.

* * * * *

A few weeks later, we were crowded around the kitchen table at Karen's house, with extra chairs on all sides because nearly everyone in the group was there. Kate's health had been declining rapidly, and her sister was now living with her to provide rides to appointments and round-the-clock care, but she was determined to stay active for as long as she could. Just the week before, she had attended one of Maureen's poetry nights, making everyone laugh with a story about one of her old college professors and interrupting Maureen's reading of an Emily Dickinson poem by jumping in to recite the whole thing from memory. Today, Kate seemed tired and didn't say much during the Bible study discussion.

Before the closing prayer, Felicity reached into her bag and brought out a gorgeous hand-knitted shawl with gradually shifting shades of magenta, purple, and midnight blue, like a sunset. It was a prayer shawl, made and prayed over by an outreach group at one of the local parishes and blessed by a priest. A hush fell over the room as she walked over and laid it around Kate's shoulders, and instinctively we all rose from our seats and gathered around. Each of us placed a

hand somewhere on the shawl as Felicity prayed aloud. Once again, I felt humbled by the privilege of being there and glad I'd made the decision to go that week rather than stay home and write.

“Don't you worry about a thing,” Felicity said to Kate in a steady, confident voice, “because we've got you. You are surrounded by love.”

When I was first getting to know the group, Hannah had told me, “Kate's our rock; I don't know what we're going to do when she's gone.” Kate was one of the older members of the group, and her unique blend of sarcasm, sweetness and spirituality made her, as Lisa put it, “everyone's best friend and confidante.” Even in the short time I had known her, I had sought her advice about one of my children's struggle with anxiety and was touched by how often and how sincerely she asked me about it later on. For each of us she had been a trustworthy friend, a wise guide and wisecracking sidekick who always seemed to know what to say. Now she said nothing, her head bowed in silence. It was our turn to be her rock of refuge, together.

Not long after receiving the prayer shawl, Kate asked her sister to drive her home. One of the many nurses in the group explained that she was no doubt exhausted by sitting upright in the chair for so long and by trying to keep her thoughts focused on the discussion. Many of us agreed it was likely the last meeting Kate would be able to attend.

Driving home, I began to cry when I saw that the dogwood trees on First Avenue had chosen that particular day to triumphantly throw open the doors to spring, draping themselves in the thick, ostentatious gowns of white blossoms that I look forward to seeing every year. The sky was robin's egg blue, and the air was warm enough to roll the car windows down a little. It had been an unusually harsh winter, even for Iowa, and on any other day I would have been

thrilled by these signs of spring, but today it seemed cruelly unfair. The earth was coming back to life just as Kate was dying.

Our dear friend “Saint Kate,” as some members of the group lovingly call her, passed away peacefully in her sleep a little over a week later, adorned with the prayer shawl and her trademark red lipstick, which her friends lovingly applied for her each day while she was in the hospital. Her pain was well managed at the end, and except for the fact that it didn’t happen at Wrigley Field, her death was indeed just as she had wished. She had planned out her funeral Mass completely, including the unlikely opening hymn of “O Come All Ye Faithful” which made many of us smile through our tears. It was just like Kate to fly in the face of convention by having us sing a Christmas song with words like “joyful and triumphant” at a time like this.

* * * * *

“In your heart you know that it is not the same to live without Him.

What you have come to realize, what has helped you to live and given you hope,

is what you also need to communicate to others.”

—Pope Francis, in The Joy of the Gospel

The Gospel According To Mermaids was written because these lovely, brave, imperfect, and holy women have stories to tell. Stories that show why each one of them believes God is real and why she continues to trust in His goodness despite going through hardships and trials. They are not canonized saints or celebrities; they are ordinary people whose lives have been touched and transformed by God’s grace.

Many of us are familiar with St. Therese of Lisieux, who lived a seemingly obscure life as a cloistered nun yet became one of the most beloved saints of the modern era. She once wrote that she was content to be a small, plain flower which grows along the roadside yet is pleasing to God. In that spirit, these “ordinary” women—each of whom could easily be your neighbor or co-worker, or the person behind you in the grocery store line—are quietly but proudly affirming that their lives contain beauty worth sharing and stories of God’s goodness that need to be made known. Each one brings her own splash of color to the bouquet offered by this book.

The New Testament urges people of faith to “always be ready to give a reason for your hope” (1 Peter 3:15). Hope grows from surviving the hard times, not from gliding seamlessly through an easy life. Because of this, although the prevailing culture on social media allows and even encourages us to hide our struggles and weaknesses, the women profiled here have chosen instead to reveal some of their flaws, wrong turns, and places of brokenness. Rather than being carbon copies of perfection, each one’s life bears the marks of real struggle and of God’s transforming mercy in a way that is all her own.

Lisa, Karen, Felicity and all the others, along with everyone who believes in Christ, are heralds of not just “the big Good News,” as my father once called it, but also a smaller, more personal one that can’t be proclaimed by anyone else. The Bible says God’s love is poured into our hearts (Romans 5:5), and we all learn in science class that something that is poured does not have fixed dimensions. Rather, it takes on the shape of its container, filling in each little dip and seeping into every corner. The basic gospel message of Christianity, or the *kerygma* as it is sometimes called, has not changed for over two millennia, but as it is poured into each unique and unrepeatable human heart, it can take on an infinite number of shapes.

Over the course of their lives, each of these nine women has allowed her relationship with God to become the central point of her life from which everything else radiates; yet the ways in which they relate to Him are quite different. Hannah sends up lighthearted, chatty prayers to God while working in the kitchen, or rests in silence before Him in the Adoration chapel. Emily feels His presence in the beauty of a sunset or in the rosebush in her backyard. Ginny has woken up in the middle of the night with His words flashing through her mind. Some of them have had experiences of God that happened suddenly and dramatically, like a flash of lightning ushering in a late-summer thunderstorm. More often, however, their faith has grown the way prairie wildflowers do, a tiny seed planted in childhood that sprouts invisibly in the deep darkness of the soil, where for many years only the One who placed the seed there could guess that anything was happening.

Kate's good news was that Heaven was not out of her reach, as she'd once thought, and that God loved her just as she was. Hannah's is that He satisfies, Maureen's that He sees the deep, unspoken needs of her heart even before she knows them herself. My own life proclaims that God gave me a second chance I did not deserve and that He sees me as I am today, not counting my yesterdays against me. Any one of us might possess the message of good news, that someone else has been waiting to hear, presented in just the right shaped container. We must each be ready, therefore, to speak it when we have the opportunity.

I am confident that as you encounter these ordinary and yet extraordinary women, they will enrich your life, as they have mine. My challenge has been to identify each one's unique voice and make her story come alive for you, so that she does not seem like a stranger but like someone you have known for years. Then, and only then, can I dare to think that her story might

move you, perhaps even challenge you to reflect on your own life in search of the golden threads, the reasons for hope, of which no human life, no matter how difficult its journey, has been deprived. Finding these threads, each of us uncovers a personal tapestry of grace for which there is no substitute. Our world, weary of the shiny things that do not satisfy, needs desperately to hear the goodness, truth and beauty hidden in all of our stories, including yours. But first, we invite you to pull up a chair, join us around Hannah's dining room table, and listen.