

Mark 14:3-9, I Cor 13

John and his mother Annie lived in one of those houses people used to call a shotgun house, until shotguns and handguns became all too common in urban neighborhoods. A person could stand at the front door and have a clear line of sight all the way to the back door in the kitchen. Until recent months the house had been one of the showplaces of the neighborhood, the front porch filled with flowering petunias and marigolds and geraniums in the summer and swept clean and tidy in the winter, but, with Annie down for the count, the house was beginning to share the slight seediness of its surroundings.

John had lived in the house all his life with his father and mother. He had a brother who lived in a nearby town with his family, but John himself had never married. The word in the church kitchen was that his mother never found any girl good enough for her son, but no one had ever heard John voice any regrets about not having a normal family life. If truth be told, said one of the ladies, she wasn't sure that there was any such thing as a normal family life anymore, so maybe John didn't have it so bad after all. In any case, the three of them had lived happily enough together for almost seventy-five years, playing cards, arguing, and stepping over cats until William, John's father, passed away at age 94. William was remembered with much pleasure by the ladies in the kitchen, for he was always one with a keen sense of fun and would come to church each Christmas topped off with a red Santa Claus hat. Annie was always spoken of with respect for her razor-sharp wit and for her continuing efforts to keep marriage-hungry females at bay.

John, at age 75, was, theoretically, retired. He was a medical man, like his father, and had officially retired five years before, but had put together a small office in the kitchen porch and continued to see some of his patients unofficially. They all could have lived in a much grander fashion, if they had been much

grander people, but William had always believed in giving away what the Lord had entrusted to him after all the bills were paid, and John had followed in his father's footsteps there as well. "To whomever much is given much is required," his father would quote.

The interior of the house was a perfectly preserved museum of life in the late forties, albeit covered with stacks of current magazines and cat hair, and most any other woman would have pitched the old furniture and appliances years ago, but Annie's wants and needs were not at all material. Annie was, instead, an inquiring mind, competitive to a fault, and fiercely protective of her family, and yet she could be overcome with wonder at the sight of a baby bird. Her grandmotherly exterior was deceptive, for Annie would much prefer betting to baking, dancing to dominoes. She subscribed to the belief that until God showed her otherwise she would keep on keeping on. She maintained her weekly schedule of bridge games, church, beauty parlor, and CNN with the guiding arm and chauffeuring of her devoted son, who never showed a hint of impatience or anything less than pleasure at being able to help his mother.

The household now was down to two, if you didn't count the cats, which, of course, demanded constantly to be counted. And it seemed like the household was soon to diminish to one. Now 96 years old, Annie's health was failing. She had suffered a plethora of problems, spent weeks in the hospital, undergoing tests, with the results all being, "We really can't do anything for you, but we would like to run another test." So John took matters into his own hands and brought his mother home, home to the shotgun house, home to the clutter, home to the cats. The front room became her bedroom, the proudly displayed reproduction of DaVinci's Last Supper partially obscured by the new hospital bed and its accompanying IV pole. After a week or two the bed and paraphernalia just blended in as though they had been there always. There John continued to give his mother the devotion he

had always shown her, but the ladies of the church weren't sure that that was quite right. You see, his health wasn't that good either, and Annie really should be in a hospital for her sake as well as for his, and, besides, it was as though John expected that his mother was going to get better and things were going to be like they always were, with him seeing patients in between driving his mother around the neighborhood. But, the conversation would always conclude, "But, you know, he is just like his father--you just can't tell him anything."

So Annie stayed home. In the beginning she was pretty much herself, interested in what was going on around her, but totally bedridden. But her condition deteriorated, and soon she sank into an intense silence. Only her eyes maintained the sparkle that was Annie.

John continued to care for her as he always did, but now he allowed himself the aid of home health nurses. Whenever he looked at his mother, her hair growing more cottony by the day, he never really seemed to see her as she was but as she had been, the nurse of his childhood cuts and bruises, the teacher of his youth, the companion of his father, his own lifelong friend. She would always be thirty-one in his eyes, as she was the summer he was ten and the family went to the beach for two glorious weeks. He would always picture her with her reddish-golden curls blowing in the breeze and remember that he thought his mother was really a mermaid in disguise.

But even the images of long ago could not shut out the reality of the present, and John longed for a way to show his mother once more how much he cared for her. He even put the matter to God, something that would have surprised the ladies in the kitchen, for neither he nor his father had been known much for prayer, but no one ever really knows who in the flock of the faithful is actually in conversation with the Father the most, just who prays the most and the longest out loud. He put the matter to God, and an answer came.

As he was straightening the blanket around his mother, he noticed that Annie's attention was drawn by a rainbow dancing on the wall. Her eyes were glittering, and a faint smile appeared upon her lips. He looked around for the source of the rainbow and discovered it to be a small prism dangling from a lamp that had belonged to his mother's mother. All of a sudden he remembered how his father used to tease to his mother as they sat together in front of the fire, "One day, my Annie, we'll be strolling down Main Street in Paradise, and all the stars will be shining like diamonds, but they'll never outshine your eyes." His mother would give his father a little push and say tartly, "William, I think your supper didn't agree with you," but she would smile, and her cheeks would turn pink. That was about as affectionate as his parents ever were in public, but it was enough. It was enough for him to know that the love that his parents shared was a very special thing.

So John, for the first time in his life did an utterly extravagant, utterly uncharacteristic thing. He bought his mother a diamond pendant, the likes of which no one in the ladies' circle had ever seen before nor were they likely to see since. The stone itself was shaped as a teardrop and was about the size of a jelly bean. It hung on a long sturdy golden chain. Bringing it home, he was as excited as though he were Santa Claus himself. He was greeted at the front door by the two of the ladies from the church, who had kindly consented to sit with Annie while he went about his important errand.

The look on their faces as he showed them his purchase wasn't to be believed. "Is it real?" gasped the one. "No, of course not," replied the other sharply. "It's got to be cubic zirconia. I saw one just like it on the Home Shopping Network. How much did you pay for it anyway?"

John raised his eyebrows quizzically. He couldn't understand their doubts. Why would he get his mother anything that wasn't real, anything that wasn't as true

as she had always been? "Well, let's just say that the cats and I will be dieting from here on out," he smiled.

"What?" gasped the woman. Her internal calculator began to work, and her figures moved across her face even as she remained silent. It just couldn't be. It just couldn't be. Why, they could put the new annex on the church for the price of that necklace! What was he thinking of anyway, to give such a gift to someone who wasn't long for this world? Annie would have been just as happy with cubic zirconia--besides, she wouldn't have wanted or appreciated diamonds in good health, why give her something like this now? It all came from not having a normal family life of his own. Well, maybe he would give the necklace to the church when it was all over. That comforted her. She stored all these thoughts away for future retrieval.

But the look on Annie's face made it all worthwhile, as he gently hung the chain around her neck, placing the stone itself in her hand and holding her hand high so it could catch the light from the window. Little raindrops of pure sunshine played across the wall, and Annie's eyes were radiant. Her lips moved, and he bent over to hear what she was saying.

"Yes, Mom?"

She struggled, slowly, weakly, "It's--just--like--heaven.'

Those were the last words she said. That evening she slipped into a coma, there in the shotgun house, and there, three days later, she went to be with her husband and her God. The diamond necklace was buried with her.

Some in the church understood, but some did not.

Now we see in a mirror dimly, then we shall see face to face.

If we reorganize and restructure every program, job description, and entity in the church but have not love, what will we have built? If we communicate with the eloquence and persistence of the world's best preachers, but have not love, what

message will have we given? If we raise \$250 million dollars in unrestricted mission giving, but have not love, for whom are we accumulating such a bounty?

Some in the church understand, but some do not.

Now we see in a mirror dimly, then we shall see face to face.

An extravagant gift to a dying mother, precious ointment for a dying Savior-what gift do we bring as to Christ's church to express our ultimate commitment, our everlasting love for a God who loved us so much that he died for us? As leaders in the Presbyterian Church (USA), called and anointed as disciples in our baptism, are we willing to lay at Christ's feet not only our finely honed management skills, our theological competency, and our powers of elocution but our heart, our soul, our mind, our weaknesses, and our vulnerabilities? Can we put aside the things over which we will never agree to serve together one Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in whom **only** we can agree? Is our relationship with him strong enough to do the gracious thing, the abundant thing, the sacrificial thing, following him, out of the usual and familiar into the unexpected and the divine?

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Now we see in a mirror dimly, then we shall see face to face.

The word of God is to love the Lord our God, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. The word of God is to give of ourselves faithfully, truly, extravagantly, for in so doing, we share in the life everlasting.

Some in the church understand, but some do not.