

ANGLICAN-LUTHERAN SOCIETY

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MINI-PRESENTATION : The Good Ending of a Norwegian American Love Story Keeping the Faith in the Continuity of Care

The Rev. Kimberli Lile, M.Div., MA, BCC

My name is Pastor Kimberli Lile, and I have a specialized ministry at an Adult Care Community called Wartburg, located in Mt. Vernon, NY, just beyond the northern rim of New York City in the county of Westchester. I was ordained by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 1994 and became a board-certified healthcare chaplain with the Association of Professional Chaplains in 2010.

My title is Director of Spiritual Care and Church Relations, as well as Pastor of United Lutheran Church.

I bring greetings from Bishop Paul Egensteiner of the Metropolitan New York Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America and Dr. David Gentner, our Chief Executive Officer and President at Wartburg.

My aim is to tell you a little bit about our campus and how we are *Keeping the Faith* in our mission and ministry at Wartburg. In my excitement about coming to Norway, I wanted to tell you the story of one of our residents who was coming to the Wartburg Chapel for worship when I first arrived as an interim pastor three years ago this summer. Her story is that of a lifelong Lutheran who really loved the Lord and found a home where faith and a history of Christian service is core to our organization's self-understanding. She was also a first generation Norwegian American. This is a case study of sorts, in which both her story and Wartburg's story is told.

Before the pandemic hit us and closed our chapel for the first time on March 8, 2020, Gloria would come on a small bus with a few others living in our Assisted Living apartments up and over a small hill on campus. They would make their way into the chapel using walkers or wheelchairs, as needed. Our other members would come from the community, our independent living cottages, and our skilled nursing facilities.

When COVID hit us and shut our chapel for worship, we didn't have church for one Sunday, while we sorted out what to do next. We then decided to use Wartburg's 100-person conference call capability to gather what turned out to be about 18 to 21 callers each Sunday on Phone Church until summer came, then we took to the outdoor rotunda in July. We utilized the television cable system to broadcast to the skilled nursing facilities Sunday morning and Lenten devotions to that part of our fellowship. We continued production of Sunday bulletins for delivery to individuals by email and in paper to Wartburg residents. In it we utilized a prayer from a South African prayer book for Spiritual Communion for those unable to receive the elements of bread and wine, as was the case of prisoners in South Africa. This delivery of bulletins instituted some weekly visits to Independent Living cottages and Assisted Living residents. This is when I began to make a weekly stop at Gloria's apartment if I remember correctly. When things lightened up a bit, I was stopping in and delivering them with distance, then sitting with her over time.

One could not go into her apartment without noticing her Norwegian décor. I saw a great number of family photos, and I saw that her granddaughter was once selected as Miss Norway by the Sons of Norway. I imagine she was in the annual Syttendemai parade that takes place each year in Brooklyn, New York celebrating Norway's Constitution Day. Then, we talked about the Rosemaling painting that I knew from my days in a mostly Norwegian congregation while growing up in the Pacific Northwest. And then there was the carving, oh, the carving was splendid--on the headboard and the clock and other places around the room.

And with this décor came the story of Gloria and her husband, Jon, because he had made it all. Before I knew it, her stories took me back to the year 1945, and World War II was still in motion. She was in New York City at the Brooklyn terminal waiting for the Staten Island Ferry. Bayridge in Brooklyn was home to many Norwegians back in the day, and there was a Scandinavian club where she and her girlfriends liked to socialize and dance.

While they waited for a ferry to go back home, they noticed that they were being noticed by several Norwegian sailors. They were talking about the girls in their own tongue thinking they could not be understood. Gloria realized this and thought it might be good to let the officer over the men know that they could be understood before they went any further in their remarks. The leader of the group was sitting with his back to her and sipping on a milkshake that he seemed to be greatly enjoying. She leaned near his shoulder and said, "Smaker det godt?" which means, "Tastes real good?"

Once beyond any slight embarrassment, the men took delight that they might be able to carry on a real conversation with these young women. They ended up delaying their return to their ship and spent time with them. When it came time to part, Jon asked Gloria for her address, but she declined offering it to him.

A few weeks later, she heard that a Norwegian convoy of seven ships had been attacked and some of the ships were lost somewhere near the Caribbean. She told me, as I listened to her, that she had thought, "Those poor fellows we met. Was their ship one of those reported lost?"

Shortly afterward, Gloria's mother and aunt met her as she arrived home from her day away. Her mother was waving an envelope. "Who do you know in the country of Columbia?" Gloria did not know what she was talking about. When she opened the letter, it was from Jon, and it was addressed to her mother. He wrote a formal letter of introduction in Norwegian telling Gloria's mother of his personal family story and asked permission to spend time with Gloria when next in New York. It turns out that Gloria's friend gave Jon Gloria's address.

The letter shared that Jon was the son of farmers from Helmsedal. Both of his parents and a younger sibling died in 1924 when Jon was five, his mother and the baby from the Spanish flu, and his father from a farming accident. His older brothers were taken in by various relatives who needed help on their farms, and Jon was put into two different foster homes with a couple of families whose care did not impress Jon's uncle when he came several years later for Jon's confirmation. Though he lived as a bachelor in the suburbs of Oslo, he thought he could do better for Jon. So, Jon saw a new world, far from the farm, for his uncle was employed as a painter by King Haakon.

Jon attended business school for two years at the direction and desire of his uncle, but one day, at about 21 years of age, he left his uncle a note thanking him for everything he had done for him and confessed

his desire for adventure. He took to the sea on a merchant ship on April 9th, 1940, the day the Germans came into Norwegian harbors and radioed a demand to return to port. The Norwegian fleet refused to return and became convoy ships supplying the allies. Thus, Jon had been sailing the Atlantic for four or five years when he met Gloria in Brooklyn. He took officer training when in port in both Britain and New York. Gloria's mother had three other daughters who married Americans, and she was thrilled, as a Norwegian, to have the possibility of one of her daughters meeting and marrying a Norwegian. The letter met with success and the two were engaged and married the next year in 1946. Their honeymoon was in Havana. Jon continued to sail, becoming a ship's captain and oil around the world for Gulf. While they contemplated making Norway home, they stayed in New York on Staten Island for their entire married life . . . until they needed a home on one level and near family in their later years.

This is when Wartburg became home to Jon and Gloria. It was near their daughter, Barbara, and they chose to move into an independent living cottage in our Lohman Village.

Wartburg is a historic campus in American terms, with a chapel that is 117 years old. It was planted by a Lutheran pastor named Rev. Passavant, known for seeing needs and starting Lutheran supported institutions that met social and educational needs. In our case, Wartburg was born as an orphanage farm school, caring for children in need of a stable home after the American Civil War. In 1869, the first building was built when Passavant convinced a sugar merchant, named Peter Moller, to create a living memorial in honor of his son who was lost in battle at age 21. With his son's inheritance, Moller provided a home for children orphaned or displaced by the war, which was also home to the first director and his family. My office is in the building that still stands strong in stone on the campus.

In the late 1800's, about 1897, the mission expanded to older adults, first women, who also needed a stable environment in which to live their later years. This occurred during a long and prolific directorship and ministry of Rev. Berkemeier who oversaw the construction and use of 18 new buildings during his tenure, one of which was the Wartburg Chapel, designed in basilica style after Berkemeier made a trip to Italy. Lutherans from all around the New York City area supported the mission in ways small and large, and Wartburg's annual fall festival was famous among Lutherans. Eventually, the children graduated out and this service of orphan care was entrusted to the state foster system after a hundred years of Wartburg history.

Senior living and healthcare became the central mission. Our campus has become solely an adult care community, and the farm of 121 acres has been reduced in size to 34 acres after a major expressway was built to the north.

We remain a campus of 30 independent living cottages, assisted living apartments, long term nursing care, short term rehabilitation, senior day care, and home care services. Currently we are constructing a new residence for those needing memory care. Our chapel remains in use, as United Lutheran Church is a congregation that cares for the altar and serves our residents by transporting them by wheelchair to worship from the nursing home and rehab center. Through United's efforts, worship remains active each Sunday morning. They are a small but dedicated group of Christians who help keep the faith alive on campus during a time when the number of individuals worshiping in society is diminishing. The congregation was originally formed in the community when three Lutheran churches in town merged over time. Wartburg then invited them to come use the chapel in 1986. They have made the campus home, as well.

I mentioned early on that Gloria was coming to worship when I first arrived. She and Jon were members of United Lutheran Church. When Jon died, his memorial service was in the Chapel, and his cremains were placed in our columbarium in 2012.

During this past year, Gloria became weaker and less able to move about. Eventually, she had a condition that took her life. She came to our rehabilitation center following a visit to the hospital, and we took care of her until she died. The day of her death, her daughter left me a message that I received prior to worship that Sunday morning. She asked me to please anoint her mother and pray for her, as her death seemed near. I went before church service with oil and anointed her and prayed at her side. I turned on the television opposite her bed and made sure she would hear our organist, James, play the day's hymns. Perhaps, she would also hear the Word. My hope was that it would give her some spiritual comfort to be in the company of her church family this morning if only by television.

Shortly after noon, my Clinical Pastoral Intern who was training as a chaplain came to me and said that a woman in rehab had died, and I knew it must be Gloria. I took the intern with me and I had her accompany me in the room. She had never been in the presence of a body without breath, and it was my opportunity, as her preceptor, to invite her into this experience. It was a defining moment for her, as her ministry broadened at this bedside. The family came soon after, and, gathering around Gloria's bed, we offered prayer commending her to God.

Because Gloria was a member of United Lutheran Church, I worked with the family to plan a memorial service for Gloria, as had been done for Jon years ago by the previous pastors. These two women colleagues both knew Gloria, so I invited them to help with the service for Gloria, as well. My predecessor as Director of Spiritual Care and Pastor of United came back and helped me with the interment of Gloria's cremains in our columbarium. Handling marble that must be screwed back into the grid without visibility is very difficult. But we did it, and so the love story of Jon and Gloria was laid to rest last October 30th. I believe Wartburg gave them a good place to nest and to worship in their later years, and, also, to rest when the time came for them to be with God in Spirit. I like to think of it as being "A Good Ending of a Norwegian-American Love Story." We were able to give them a place where "Keeping the Faith within the Continuity of Care" as an adult care community was carried through from the beginning to the end of their life spent with us.

I like to call our worshiping community, United at Wartburg, as residents coming from several different denominations worship with us in chapel on Sunday, in the nursing home and in Meadowview, our assisted living community during the week. I also like to think that we can embrace being "United in Christ" on our campus, as during the last fifteen years or so Wartburg has become home to several orders of Roman Catholic religious women. It began with Dominicans, then the Franciscan Sisters of Hope, and then the Sisters of Divine Compassion. We made a ministry agreement with a Roman Catholic priest who provides four masses each week for the various residential situations on campus. We endeavor to be United in Christ and neighbor to all as we move through the challenges of contemporary history together within the vicinity New York City's diversity and innumerable challenges.

Thank you for the kindness of your interest and attention. If you would like to learn more about our ministry or help preserve the Chapel at Wartburg, please indicate your interest with further conversation. When you come to New York, consider yourself invited to Wartburg, where I can give you a personalized tour of our Adult Care Community and our Chapel. When others have not survived the

challenges of the pandemic, we are working hard to keep mission and ministry alive on our campus while providing care that enlivens mind, body, spirit, and FAITH!

Peace be with you . . .