

The Rev. Joan M. Kilian

Trinity Episcopal Church

Ruth 1: 15 – 17

Psalm 121

1 Corinthians 15: 20 – 26, 35 – 38, 42 – 44, 53 – 58

John 5: 24 – 27

“Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die – there I will be buried.”

These words from the Book of Ruth describe the relationship that Cecil and Edith had for 68 years. Sixty-eight years. That’s a long time of going and following, cohabitating, comingling, co-believing. But that’s what these two people shared for nearly seven decades. They were truly companions for this journey we call life.

Merriam Webster defines “companion” as ‘one who keeps company with another,’ or ‘one that is closely connected with something similar.’ The word is derived from Latin: *com* (with) and *panis* (bread). Literally someone with whom one would break or share bread. All of those describe Edith and Cecil. They were a team. A team who shared a love of music, a love of hospitality and opening their home, a love of family and a love of God, among many other things. In fact, so much a team, that it is hard for some of us to think or to speak about one without mentioning the other.

Now, they didn’t see eye to eye about everything. Cows, for example. Cecil was an emphatic ‘yes!’ Edith was a “What?? Then YOU come take care of them!” And yet she kept the home fires burning, and took care of the cows anyway. Like most couples who are together for many years, they found a way to work through their differences, a large part of which was not trying to resolve things in the heat of the moment, but waiting until cooler heads prevailed. And remembering that God was in the midst. Or at least that’s what Edith told me. Their children may have a different version of that story.

Cecil and Edith were perhaps the only couple I have known who actually *upsized* their home in retirement. And it was because of their shared love of music. When they moved from Two Chop Rd. to Oakleaf Dr., it was because they had to find a home large enough for their growing collection of player pianos in which they took such delight. When a group of us from Trinity came around caroling in December of 2015, Edith and Cecil met us in the converted garage, also known as the music room. There, Cecil delighted us with playing several different rolls from their large player piano music collection. The monthly sing-a-long gatherings that they enjoyed hosting for many years was one of their favorite things to do, and they have passed their love of music on to all three of their children. Ask Charles to sing “the Great Speckled Bird,” a favorite, I think of Cecil’s, but not so much Edith’s. Or ask Nancy and Joanna to blend their voices in harmony as only sisters can do.

The glue that held Edith and Cecil together more than anything though, was their faith: their deep and abiding trust in God. It showed in their living, but it also showed in their dying, their assurance that something more awaits. Cecil’s decision, as a doctor, to not seek further treatment for his cancer was not only a courageous decision, it was also a faithful decision. After all, if we, as Christians, really believe what we say week in and week out, then there is no reason to fear our inevitable deaths. Cecil didn’t fear, and neither did Edith. Both of them planned for it and chose the scriptures and music for this service ahead of time.

“Very truly, I tell you,” Jesus says in today’s reading from the Gospel of John, “anyone who hears my word and believes in God who sent me has eternal life.” Cecil and Edith *did* believe, and were already experiencing a taste of eternal life here in this life. Eternal life *isn’t* about going on and on forever. Eternal life is about the infinite *quality* of life we will experience with God, not the infinite *quantity*. Eternal life is true life lived in the nearer presence of God. Life lived as the ultimate fulfillment of who we have each been created to be.

Cecil and Edith each lived into that fulfillment of whom God created them to be by serving God’s people and God’s Creation. God gave Cecil the gifts to become a doctor. Cecil was a physician in private practice and an ER doctor, but his main vocational love was Public Health. In this capacity, Cecil ensured that people ate healthy, safe food and received quality health care at clinics. He also fought industrial air pollution, which led to The National Wildlife Federation honoring him as the Conservationist of the Year in 1972. Additionally, Cecil was a faithful steward of God’s Creation in the gardens he kept every year and in the produce that he shared with others.

Edith’s life was also devoted to others, through her nurturing and teaching and counseling. Marrying a week before Cecil started Med School, she supported them while he studied. Later, while he traveled weekly for work, she would keep those homefires burning and the kids and the cows fed, the veggie garden weeded and the farm tended. But Edith’s calling was also beyond the home. She served as the church secretary at Grace Episcopal Church in Waycross, her home town. She became an elementary school teacher, and then a secretary to the head of Pediatrics at MCG. Later, as the kids were growing up, Edith helped counsel young pregnant women so that they could find the care and services that they needed.

“Very truly, I tell you,” Jesus says in John, “anyone who hears my word and believes in him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life.” God used this wonderful couple to touch many other lives along the way. In one sense, it’s hard to be sad at the loss of two people who led such faithful and fulfilling lives, knowing that, even now, they are partaking of that consummate joy that awaits us all. A joy that undoubtedly contains music and singing.

The reality is though, for those of us who are still here, that there is a hole in our lives that no one else can fill. We don’t deny the grief at our loss of Edith and Cecil from OUR nearer presence, but John’s words redirect us to the bigger picture: our destination, our true home, the fulfillment of God’s desire in creating us, the Kingdom of God that is ever so much more glorious than we can possibly imagine. What we go through now, whatever life and experiences, opportunities, gifts and struggles, it is just a small part of the whole. Death does *not* have the final word. Alleluia, thanks be to God! +