

Linnie never failed

Our neighbor Linnie died some years ago in mid-January. She was 96 years old, sound of body and mind right up to the end. She lived alone – or, as she would say, independently. She was a true descendant of pioneer stock. She married a man much older than she and consequently became the instantaneous mother of seven stepchildren. That didn't prevent her from also raising four of her own. Nor did it spare her the grief, given her longevity, of outliving most of them.

When her husband died she was still a vigorous 52 years old, young enough to remarry. Instead, she decided to set back the clock and behave like a woman with her whole life ahead of her. She went to college. Sonoma State University had just opened its doors and Linnie was enrolled in its first class of freshmen. Consequently she became a member of the first class to graduate from Sonoma State – and what's more, insofar as she was placed at the head of the line, she became the first *person* to graduate from that increasingly prominent institution. And now at the age of 55 she began a career as an elementary school teacher whose pupils remember her to this day. By the time we met her as new neighbors so many years ago she was a 71 year old retiree – but a very active one, cultivating an organic garden, keeping us posted on the happenings of the neighborhood, teaching Bible and otherwise assisting in the guidance of the local Baptist Church.

Naturally we were there for her memorial service, where I was personally so moved by the minister's simple eulogy. He began by highlighting the events of Linnie's life and career. And then he recited that famous passage from St. Paul's *Letter to the Corinthians*, the part that goes:

*Love is patient; love is kind. It is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong but delights in the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.
Love never fails.*

Now listening to the rhythmic recitation of that somewhat abstract passage one's mind might wander, even as our minds so often do wander during familiar biblical readings. But as if he were developing a latent image on film into a magically visible positive, the minister *recited the passage again*, replacing the word Love with Linnie's name – and, my, how those words came to life:

Linnie was patient; Linnie was kind. Linnie was not jealous or boastful; Linnie was not arrogant or rude. Linnie did not insist on her own way; she was not irritable or resentful; Linnie did not rejoice at wrong but delighted in the truth. Linnie bore all things, believed all things, hoped all things, endured all things. Linnie never failed.

The Gospel of St. John says that with the arrival of Jesus "The Word became Flesh and dwelt among us". What that Baptist eulogist was saying to all of us is that St. Paul's words *became flesh in our neighbor Linnie*.

I don't know about you but from now on I'm going to reread that preacher's text from St. Paul often and hope that by my reformed behavior I may begin to see my own name emerge upon the page as the legitimate subject of all those sentences that begin with Love.