

Remembering Narvel A. Somdahl

December 29, 1932-May 13, 2013

Transfiguration Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephanie Coltvet Erdmann

Let us pray.

Gracious God, we give you thanks for the life of your servant, Narv. May we be filled with hope as we hear your promises and we are reminded of the abundant life you have to offer all who put their faith in you. Amen.

Marilyn, Dave, Sonja, and Debbie, and family, grace and peace to you from God our creator, Jesus our redeemer, and the Holy Spirit, our comforter. We have gathered here this morning in God's presence as family and friends to remember and celebrate the life of Narvel Somdahl and to commend him into the care of our good shepherd, Jesus Christ. Gerhard Frost once said that to mourn for someone is to pay them a great compliment; it is to give meaning and significance to their life. Thank you to all who have come to mourn. You are blessing Narv's family with your presence; and it shows that Narv made a difference in your life.

Knowing Narv's good humor and the love he had for his Norwegian heritage, I cannot resist telling you an Ole and Lena joke that would have made him chuckle.

Ole, Lena, and Sven were lost in the North woods and were becoming desperate, having run out of food several days ago. It was winter, the snow was deep, their situation was looking very bleak. When Ole dug down into the snow to look for something to eat, he found an old lamp and upon rubbing it to get the snow off, a genie came out.

The genie says, "I am the great genie of the North and I can grant each of you one wish.

Ole says, "I wish I was back on my farm." Poof, Ole was gone.

Lena quickly says, "I wish I was back on da farm vith Ole." Poof, Lena was gone.

Sven was sitting there looking sad and the genie finally says, "What is your wish?".

Sven says, "Gee, I'm really lonely. I wish Ole and Lena was back here vith me."

It's funny, but there's a poignant truth to this story too. Like Sven, we wish Narv was back here with us. And yet we trust, and place our hope in the promise that Narv is safe in the arms of his gracious Savior.

Today we give thanks to God for Narvel Anker Somdahl, child of God. Baptized May 31, 1933 in Moreland Lutheran Church, Oak Park, Illinois, he celebrated the 80th anniversary of his baptism this past Easter. Narv knows God and God knows Narv by name.

When Narv was born, his mother was worried he wouldn't live long due to damage from the umbilical cord that was wrapped around his throat. He breathed heavily for some time as a baby, but as the days went on, he grew stronger and lived an abundant life. As a little boy, his nickname was "Peanut" because he was so small, but that didn't prevent him from living life to the full.

(I have to say, learning this story about him gave me insight into something Narv said to me the Saturday before he died. He told me a story that I had forgotten. When I first came to TLC, Narv and I were standing next to each other looking at the calendar list of flowers being donated weekly for Sunday morning worship in honor of or in memory of someone or an occasion. Evidently he jokingly commented on my short stature, asking if I needed a hoist in order to see a certain date. At that, I took him into my office, sat him down, and set him straight...he says I did so in a loving and humorous way. But he said it made him think.)

Narv had a good way with people. A calm, steady presence, he never raised his voice. Thoughtful, analytical, with a gentle way of helping people see his point of view. An introvert, he thought before he talked. And when he did speak, he usually had something worthwhile or something funny to say.

Marilyn and Narv met at NDSU through the Lutheran Student Association. He was a senior while she was a freshman. She liked his nice smile and was taken by his good

humor. On their first date, they saw the movie “How to Marry a Millionaire” and the rest was history. After Narv spent time serving our country, he and Marilyn married in 1958, and were blessed with three wonderful children (above average as Garrison Keillor would say)—David, Sonja, and Deborah. Early in their family life, they lived in Wisconsin, Michigan, Nebraska, and Virginia until setting in Bloomington in 1974.

As a family, the Somdahls enjoyed tent camping together, traveling in the station wagon to state parks and national parks throughout the country. On one occasion—and a rare one at that—as the family was on their way to visit Narv’s parents on Turtle Lake in Becker County, they had a little problem. As they were travelling west on 94 near Alexandria, the car started sputtering and Marilyn held her breath as (out of the corner of her eye) she noticed the gas gauge sitting on empty. Thankfully they cleared the interstate and made it onto an exit ramp. Narv got out of the car, walked to the gas station to get a portable tank of gas, returned to fill up the car, and then they continued on their way, like nothing had happened. This was a rare occurrence for Narv, who tended to be precise in his planning; but it sure made for a good family memory to keep him humble.

Wanting to ensure his capable daughters were prepared for their own car care in the future, Narv made sure they knew how to change the oil on the car as teenagers, teaching them once and then asking them to show him that they remembered how, a few months down the road. He was patient and persistent, instilling confidence in them with his very presence.

You have no doubt heard the stories of Narv’s commitment to his Norwegian heritage and the years of service he and Marilyn have dedicated to various organizations. And with great commitment, he was also an active part of Transfiguration Lutheran Church, serving as a financial secretary for a time, president of the TLC Foundation, co-chairing our last capital campaign ‘Reflecting the Light’, serving on the stewardship team, volunteering to serve and help out wherever he could. He was a regular with the TLC

Walkers on Wednesday mornings, rain or shine; and enjoyed participating in Bible studies, small groups and coffee fellowship.

Life was not always easy for Narv. He faced plenty of challenges along the way. One of the greatest trials, however, came in these last few months when he and Marilyn learned of the pancreatic cancer that had invaded his body. As per usual, however, he took it in stride, stayed calm, and consulted with his doctor and family before deciding how to proceed. When I asked him how he was coping with this diagnosis, he simply said with a smile, “Keep the faith and look for the bright spot; it’ll show up.” These are words we can hold onto in the wake of our loss.

In the Good News for this day from the Gospel of John, Jesus tells us that he has come so that his sheep, his followers, may have life, and have life abundantly. Isn’t that what we all desire? Not just life, but abundant life? The chance to not only endure, but to thrive; not simply to exist, but to live life to the full? We long for purpose, meaning, and fulfillment. We yearn to be known by name and accepted for who we are, and that’s exactly what Christ has to offer. Abundant life. It’s not just a life that we can have in the future. It’s a life that we can have now.

Sometimes we think we can have this abundant life by pursuing our career with vigor, earning as much money as we can to buy as much stuff as we want to satisfy our growing needs. But in the end, we know we cannot take this “stuff” with us. Abundant life is not something you can earn or achieve. It’s not something you can buy. Abundant life is found in a relationship, with our Creator, and in relationships with others—by loving our neighbor as ourselves. Abundant life is a pure gift from God who loves us enough to lay down his life for us. Knowing our joys and our sorrows, our sin and our pain, God sent Jesus to restore a relationship with us. The Gospel of John reminds us that there are so many thieves and bandits who would rob us of life, who would cheat us of abundance. But Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who knows his sheep by name, calls us to the gate of life, abundant life, with him.

Jesus , the Good Shepherd, has called Narv by name, and has granted him abundant life, more than he has ever known. It's that bright spot that Narv was looking for. He kept the faith, he heard the shepherd's voice, he's safe in God's embrace. May we too listen for the shepherd's voice and trust in God's promise of abundant life. Amen.