

Deaconess Evelyn Middelstadt, R.I.P.

Colleagues,

Deaconess Evelyn Middelstadt was murdered in Wichita, Kansas, last week. Evelyn and I were classmates at Valparaiso University 60 yrs ago and have been friends ever since. We've bumped into each other sporadically during those 6 decades at church gatherings, Lutheran Deaconess events and Valpo homecomings.

At age 79 she's been officially "retired" – a couple of times, I think. She was following her diaconal calling yet once more when the client she was helping apparently killed her. The only info I have is from postings that two of Evelyn's deaconess sisters have sent to me.

Here is one of them from a Wichita newspaper:

Victim may have tried to help her killer

BY STAN FINGER

The Wichita Eagle

The man suspected of killing a beloved retired social worker had spent much of his four months of employment wheedling her for money, the man's boss said Thursday.

On the day authorities say 79-year-old Evelyn Middelstadt was killed, the man had been told that not only would he not be given a remodeling job he wanted, he owed the company back rent and advances on his wages.

"I'm just guessing that when he was with Evelyn, he was so

upset... he got into this argument and he lost control," said Moses Thompson, president of Minority Contractors & Consultants Inc. at 507 N. Volutsia, where Middelstadt worked as an assistant manager.

She was found dead at the company's office Wednesday morning (Aug. 1), and a 47-year-old employee was arrested that afternoon at Thompson's house in Park City after being brought from Oklahoma by his uncle at Thompson's request.

The man had driven to his uncle's house near Stillwater in Middelstadt's white 1996 Buick Century, said Lt. Ken Landwehr of the Wichita Police Department's homicide unit. Authorities believe Middelstadt was killed Tuesday afternoon, though they were awaiting the results of a Thursday autopsy to find out how.

Charges are expected to be filed today.

Middelstadt had worked at Minority Contractors & Consultants for 12 years after a career in social work that friends say achieved legendary status.

People around Wichita "have no idea how known she is around the nation," said the Rev. Allen Hoger, pastor of Immanuel Lutheran Church, 909 S. Market, where Middelstadt worshipped. "There are people from coast to coast grieving with us." [Hoger is a Seminex grad ('78) AND an LCMS pastor!]

Thompson said he had urged Middelstadt early this week to stop giving the suspect money when he pressured her for it. He needed it for food, he would say. Or gasoline for his van.

Middelstadt had a hard time saying "no," Thompson said, and she would give the man rides when he had someplace to go.

Within minutes of learning about Middelstadt's death shortly after 9 a.m. Wednesday, Thompson said, he got a call from the

suspect's uncle in Oklahoma saying the man had shown up unexpectedly in a car.

Police initially thought Middelstadt's fatal injuries may have been the result of a fall, Thompson said, until he told them about her missing car and cell phone.

As Thompson was at City Hall answering questions for police, he said, the suspect's uncle called him and asked what was going on.

Thompson convinced the man to bring his nephew back to Wichita. When Thompson learned they had arrived at his house in Park City, he called 911.

The suspect was arrested without incident.

The mood was somber Thursday at the Self-Help Network of Kansas, which Middelstadt created at the kitchen table of her modest home in 1984.

"We're really saddened," said Julie Underwood, the network's communications coordinator.

One of her first duties when she went to work for the network a few months ago, Underwood said, was to read what has become known as "the kitchen table story," which tells of the network's roots and Middelstadt's role in its creation.

It's displayed on an easel for visitors to see.

"I was really touched when I read it," Underwood said. "She had a vision. Her vision was grand."

Hoger, the minister, said he was not surprised that the man suspected of killing Middelstadt was someone she was helping. "It's just very sad. Here is somebody they had tried to help,

and what a waste it was – both of her life, and now, of course, of his.”

As he reflected on Middelstadt’s death, Hoger said, he thought of the soldiers who hit the beaches on D-Day. They knew they were doing something dangerous, but that didn’t stop them. “Evelyn didn’t want to be killed,” he said, “but she did want to do work in which she knew she was in danger.”

Because she knew what could happen, Hoger said, her fearlessness wasn’t naivete. “It was tragic what happened... but it was also a very holy thing. It was an act of love,” he said. “God is going to speak to this community through her death, even as he did through her life.”

[EHS again]

Evelyn and I were classmates in the late 1940s as Valparaiso University undergrads, she on the deaconess track, me on pre-seminary. My “official” connection with the Lutheran Deaconess Association began a decade later, and once more it was at V.U. When I started teaching there in 1957, the biggest bunch of students taking a theology major were students in the LDA program. So they were always in my classes, and often the majority in upper division courses. That classroom connection lasted for 14 years. Toward the end of that time I got nudged into the department chairmanship, and that made me academic advisor for all deaconess students and put me (ex officio) on the LDA board. And after that V.U. adventure came to closure in 1971 Marie and I have continued as supporters of the LDA cause year in and year out.

The LDA is a strange and wonderful outfit. It arose within the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in the early part of the last

century, 1919 to be exact, but like many similar movements/causes in Missouri it was “in and with,” but not “under” the LCMS. Often generated by lay initiatives these initiatives were loyal to Missouri, but ran their own show. Here’s a list of such organizations—the ones I can remember—that arose within Missouri back in those days—Lutheran Laymen’s League, Lutheran Women’s Missionary League, Walther League (the LCMS youth movement), Lutheran Human Relations Assn, the Liturgical Institute—even Valparaiso University itself back in 1925. All of them working “in and with” the LCMS, but not “under.” Consequently some of these movements morphed into becoming “pan-Lutheran.” Classical case is the LDA.

LDA deaconesses work both sides of the Lutheran denominational divide in the US (LCMS and ELCA) and in Canada (ELCIC and LCC). And they are engaged in diaconal ministries not only here “up north.” One of our own Schroeder clan, my sister’s daughter Heidi Michelsen, is LDA veteran in service with the marginalized in San Jose, Costa Rica.

But these LDA sisters are even more ecumenical than that. In recent years they have played a significant role in world-wide diaconal conversations. For example, LDA exec, Dr. Louise Williams, is currently president of DIAKONIA, the international association of diaconal ministries around the world.

Now back to Evelyn. I spoke with her pastor Allen Hoyer this Thursday morning about the funeral day before yesterday in Witchita. Eighteen deaconess sisters from around the country assembled as the choir for the liturgy. I asked Allen for a copy of his homily. He cyber-wired it to me. I’ll paste it here below for your edification.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder.

SERMON

Text: Mark 10:32-45

The life of Christ is a journey to the Third Day. The Father has aimed his Son's life in the direction of the cross, to take it up for the life of the world, to suffer abuse and brutal death, but in the end to rise from death. We learn from early childhood never to call the death of Jesus a tragedy. We learn from our cradles that was the Father's will, and that our Lord himself knew and accepted it. We even call the day of his crucifixion Good Friday – "Good" because God is good, Jesus was goodness itself in human flesh; and good because his death was so good for us. It made the grave itself the gateway to heaven for all who believe.

The journey for every disciple is also a journey to the Third Day, the Last Day, the Day of Resurrection. It, too, must go the way of the cross; there is no way to the Resurrection except through the cross. The Kingdom of God must be entered – as Paul in Acts tells a congregation of new Christians – by way of many afflictions. But what does this mean? No one knows except God.

James and John were brothers in that order: first James, then younger brother. Both were called on the same day, both left their nets and followed at the same time. And, as time went on, both got hungry, the way we get hungry. Hungry for recognition and glory. Hungry to bask in the glow of Jesus. Hungry for their dreams to be fulfilled, to find fulfilment. Hungry to reach that day of looking back and saying proudly, "Yes, we were with him from the beginning. We were always at his side, and that's why we're here, seated with him today at the banquet of his glory."

They did not know. God only knew. God is the only one who ever

knows. John lived long – incredibly long for those days. James was the first Apostle to be killed. John became the bishop of Ephesus, James never made it out of Jerusalem. John died of natural causes, James lost his head at the hands of the Herod. Evelyn did both – lived long in service, and died a brutal death, When they were called they looked just alike. On that impatient day of their foolish request, they sounded just alike. But each one receives his own calling from God, each her road through the cross to the resurrection. And nobody knows what the road will be. God only knows.

But we also know this: That if we have been redeemed by the Righteousness of God, we are committed to the Righteousness of God. Since our Master came that the world may have life, we are called to work for the life of the world. And just as his road meant doing good, healing the sick, and proclaiming the Kingdom, so does ours. Although each one's calling is different, there is in another sense only one calling that we all share. Every follower of the Messiah is called to believe in Him and the One who sent him, and to bear witness with their mouths and in their lives. This witness always includes, among other things, praying for one's enemies, and endeavoring to overcome evil with good.

To live by faith, in other words, to follow Christ to the Resurrection, is to live a life of love. If your Lord is a man whose arms stretched out on the cross, then you will desire in your heart life for everyone you meet. You will desire that person not to perish, no matter who they are; and you will desire good for them in their days on earth. A godly heart is not just a heart that believes, but always a heart that loves. And a heart that loves asks itself this, "How can I be an instrument in the hand of God for the sake of another?"

By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But he, seeking to

justify himself, asked, "But who is my neighbor?"

Evelyn Middelstadt received from God – not all at once, but over many years and through various failures and difficulties – the new heart for which we always pray in Psalm 51, the Communion offertory: Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

It did not come naturally to her. At her birth she was constituted no different from James and John at the height of their sad, silly ambition. She, too, was born with the seed of wanting glory, wanting to be served. But early on, already in her own family, the Spirit who came in her Baptism did not depart from her, but began and continued to shape her in the image of God's Son. And this good work by her Lord, begun and continued in Evelyn, was ended last week.

Not "interrupted," not "stopped." Don't say "brought to a halt" or "wrecked." But "ended, finished, completed." As we often pray from Philippians in the liturgy: May God, who has begun this good work in us, bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

Evelyn died facing great evil. She died at the hands of someone whose life was in the grip of great evil. But as a disciple she understood that in this fallen world one cannot help others without confronting evil. She also knew full well that the same sin which drives anyone to evil was in her. She had in her heart the sin of Eve, the sin of Cain, the sin of us all. She knew that the only difference between her and her killer was the grace of God that had converted her heart and come to govern her life.

Martin Luther would write in the maturity of his career that one of the distinguishing marks of the Church was her afflictions. Yes, the truly defining marks of the Church are the pure Gospel

of Christ in proclamation and absolution, the offering of Baptism in God's name, and the Holy Supper of Christ. But because the Gospel and its sacraments are always offered in a fallen world that is full of evil, the Church on earth shall always be, said Luther, a suffering Church.

This truth pertains, then, not only to the pastoral ministry of faith, but equally to the diaconal ministry of love. It is not just Apostles but also deacons who receive martyrdom in its many forms. Satan seeks to halt, not just the proclamation of repentance and the forgiveness of sins, but equally the deeds of love that accompany the Word. For he knows how empty the proclamation becomes when carried out by those who do not love, and how the deeds of love have a witnessing power all their own. So, he hates faithful deaconesses just as much as a hates faithful preachers.

But just as the Word can never be stopped – Satan cannot because one little Word can fell him – neither can the lives of love that it creates and sends into the world. The Lord of the Church always uses both the lives and the deaths of his servants to proclaim his glory. Tertullian was right: the blood of the martyrs is always seed. May much grow from the sad and ugly – but also glorious and blessed – event of last week. May many follow Evelyn, even as she has followed Christ – which is always through the cross, to the Resurrection.

Allen C Hoyer, Pastor
Immanuel Lutheran Church
Wichita, Kansas
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