

*<sup>7</sup>But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. <sup>8</sup>We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; <sup>9</sup>persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; <sup>10</sup>always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.*

Today is a day to rejoice. After many years, we are reviving a St. Patrick's tradition which truly embodies who we are. We are a community of celebration. We are also an aging parish. We have always been both these things. Even when we had an active children's program we were in the business of aging, because aging is not only the work of the old, but also the task of the young. "Act your age!" says the exasperated mother. "He's young, but he's daily growing," says the old Scottish folksong. Life is all about getting older.

And so we age together. We rise. We peak. We grow old. And because it all comes from God, all of it is good. It may not always seem that way, but then I think of what St. Paul said later on in the same letter we read this morning when he prayed to God to relieve him of a thorn in his flesh and God answered, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' Power is made perfect in weakness.

Today we are pleased to welcome our wisest elders, parishioners and friends ninety years and above, many of whom have forgotten more than I have ever

known. They come that we might remember, for the church is the keeper of memory and we learn from each other's lives.

It all started the day Barbara Klingbeil called me and said something important and wise. "I think it's terrible to wait until someone has died to talk about their lives. Why can't we remember each other when we're still here?"

Her words awakened a wonderful memory, a party given by my friend Rosemary not long before she died. She rented a restaurant and invited everyone she had ever known to lunch. She wanted all the parts of her life to come together and meet each other, that she might see herself complete. In loving Rosemary, we found that we loved one another. "I have called you friends," said Jesus at the last supper.

Everything that Paul is saying about himself, and his difficulties could have been said about Rosemary and about all of us as we age: life is a gift from God, but during its course, we meet affliction. We did not let it crush us. We've all been perplexed and known despair, but we didn't let it crush us. We have known conflict, but we are not destroyed. We experience great joy and great suffering. All of us. There is nothing to be ashamed of.

We are a people, grounded in the love of God, who grow greater in that love because we do it together. We teach each other. We support each other through trial and joy. We celebrate each other's milestones, and like a choir, our voices and

our experiences come together to produce a rich sound none of us could achieve on our own.

Our 90+ parishioners and friends are the jewel in our crown. It is good to celebrate them when they are alive. To thank them for all they have done and been. To support them.

Which brings me to the most mysterious line in the little passage of scripture I read to start us off: <sup>10</sup>[we are] always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.

He refers to himself as “we” in this letter, because the more we progress in our spiritual paths, the more we realize that we are not an “I” but a “we.” God lives within us, but so do all our friends, relations, and ancestors, the people who taught us as children, the people we worked with as adults, our own children. We would not be here without others, and the more we feel our connection, the brighter the light of God becomes until it breaks through the jars of clay we have made to contain it. People who love God glow. People in love with each other glow. People nearing death also often glow. They see things I cannot see. They see how ridiculous all our worldly striving can be if we take it too seriously. They enter the mystery of God. That is what Paul is talking about when he says he carries in his body the death of Jesus, because what we call death has ceased to frighten him. He sees it like it is. To be human is to change. To be human is to inhabit a form

that is impermanent. To be with Jesus, to be one with Jesus, is to see this. To be fully human is to live forever. Just not in this form.

So when we celebrate our eldest elders, we are celebrating life in abundance, which is precisely what Jesus came to teach.

And to celebrate life in abundance is to celebrate it in all its forms.

I think it no coincidence that Connie van Loben Sels breathed her last on Thursday, the day Ron and Jackie went next door to remind her of today's party. They were able to bless her and thank her for all that she is and has been in the life of this parish.

We are the church of Jesus Christ, but we are also the church of one another, and Connie was one of those who made St. Patrick's possible. She will always live in us and through us, and I feel her blessing. We've been through some hard times at St. Patrick's, and I see Connie, keeping watch over us like a mother, holding us in her prayers, refusing to let go until she knew that we would be all right, that we were back on the path of helping each other to grow and giving parties to remember. Nothing heals like celebration. Jesus knew that. So did Connie. Amen.