

One Wild and Precious Life
Remembering Jean Helen Mattheiss (1939-2021)

Reverend Kenneth E. Kovacs, Ph.D.
Catonsville Presbyterian Church, Catonsville, MD

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In the first centuries of the church there was a towering intellectual figure, today known simply as Irenaeus. He was born into a Christian family in 130 A.D. in Smyrna, modern day Izmir in Western Turkey. Not much is known about him. He became a priest and moved to Lyon, France and served in the Rhone Valley, at a time when the Roman Empire was persecuting Christians. He was a theologian and writer, influenced by theologians in Asia Minor who knew John the disciple of Jesus. We're not sure when Irenaeus died. He was buried in Lyon. Unfortunately, during the Reformation, French Calvinists, Huguenots, theological forebears of Presbyterians, destroyed his grave and tomb in 1562.

Why is this relevant? Irenaeus isn't read much these days by Christians unless you're training in seminary. But there is something that he said that has come down to us nearly 1900 years ago, a pearl of great price. It's just one sentence from a larger work: "The glory of God is the human person fully alive." Or "The glory of God is the human person coming fully alive." That is, God's glory shines through a person who is fully or is coming fully alive. Or, to put it a different way, God is glorified when a person is fully alive or coming fully alive. Whichever way you parse it, Irenaeus understood that at the heart of the Christian life is the growth, emergence, development, fulfillment, and embodiment of personhood and he could claim this because he looked at Christ and saw embodied in him God's deep desire to glory and be glorified in and through a human life, to enable a human life to be authentically human, fully alive.

What was witnessed in Christ continues in those who follow, trust, and love Christ, the same Christ at work in us, at work *for* us, to bring us fully alive. All of this means, theologically speaking, that we are not yet human, but on the way to becoming fully human, fully alive in our humanity. And the more we grow, the more we live into our humanity, coming alive in the fullness of our being, courageously stepping into our lives, into our bodies, into our experience, stepping into the world as full person, authentic human beings, with love, with compassion, with pride for being who we are created in the image of God, something of God's glory shines through us. To withhold our true identity, our authentic selves, to hide, perhaps in fear and shame, hiding rejection, even persecution—to pull back and not step into the life freely given to us by God, I believe breaks the heart of God. But then God's grace steps in, maybe even more so in those challenging times, steps in all the more slowly, gradually removing every obstacle, every barrier, every hiding place, in order to show us, remind us we are loved fully for who we are and so are free to step out and step into our lives and to love. We are free to answer Mary Oliver's (1935-2019) question, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"¹ The answer to that question is the gift we offer back to God for this wild and precious and wondrous life.

Today, we are here to remember and to give thanks to God for Jean's answer to this question, for the life and witness and love of Jean Mattheiss, to remember and give thanks to the God for her precious, wondrous—dare I say *wild*?—life. Today, we bear witness to her faith, her love, her joy, her determination to live and to share her life and her love—with Mary Lou, the love of her life for forty-five years, who blessed her life, the joy of her life, in a relationship of deep mutual love and respect and growth, full of fun, and challenges to be sure, but adventures, wild adventures in an *RV*, exploring the world, traveling the highways and byways of this country, driving down a road together, sharing the road with someone precious and dear and full of love. Consider that image. What a gift that is—the privilege of traveling the road of life with someone we hold dear and who holds us the same way.

Something of God's glory shone through Jean's life, the way she lived and loved through her life, caring for people, taking delight in people, and animals, making friends, expanding Jean and Mary Lou's network of friends—marvelously represented here today. I saw it in the way she interacted with folks at church on Sunday mornings. Always smiling. So full of joy. So happy to be there, happy to see others. And I could feel it the way she came up to me most weeks, with *gusto*, and hugged me—and was always sure to ask, “Hey, how's Mark doing?” I saw it in the way she served as a deacon in the church, extending compassion, grace, and loving care to those in need. The congregation was very sad to learn of Jean's death and please know, Mary Lou, that you are and remain in our prayers. And I witnessed, and many here, witnessed first-hand Jean's love, her love for you, Mary Lou. It was a privilege and joy to co-officiate with Dorothy Boulton at your wedding. A day I will always remember. We can only imagine what you're feeling today, Mary Lou, but know, look around you and take comfort in knowing that you're not alone.

On this spectacularly beautiful day we remember and give thanks for life, for Jean's precious, wondrous, wild life, and now to offer her life into the wide embrace of God's greater life, greater love. We can place our sad and heavy, broken hearts into the heart of God who holds us, and holds us together, with a love that will never let us go. For nothing can separate us from God's love (Romans 8:31-39). We can acknowledge our grief, our feelings and sadness, and give thanks for our memories. However, I think Jean would be encouraging us to live, to live in the time allotted to us, to strive to live more fully, to step into our lives, our hopes, our dreams, embrace the day, embrace our lives, embrace one another, come alive—and then give God all the glory and praise and see God's glory in us. Well done, Jean, well done faithful servant...enter into the joy of your Lord (Matthew 25:23). Amen.



One of Jean's handmade quilts.

¹ Mary Oliver, "The Summer Day," *House of Light* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990).