

*A Celebration of Life and Witness*

Nelson Beach Tharp (1919-2020) & Ellen Tharp (1920-2020)  
Catonsville Presbyterian Church, Catonsville, MD  
October 2, 2021

Rev. Kenneth E. Kovacs, Ph.D.

We're here today to remember and to give thanks to God for not one life but two long remarkable lives, two lives that moved together as if one, like a double helix, interwoven. Nelson and Ellen. It's been said, "The meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances: if there is any reaction, both are transformed."<sup>1</sup> And the transformation of these two, both individually and together, yields in the transformation of others. Inseparable for so much of their lives, and now, remarkably, together even in death. Together they shared a life, built a life, offered their lives – to family, friends, neighbors, society, this community of faith – worked to transform a broken and wounded world.

Today we have heard how these two lives, each in their own way and together, had an enormous impact upon our lives and the life of the world. As we have heard, we are honoring, celebrating two different, unique lives, each with their own personality, their own passions, interests, viewpoints, beliefs, their own stories, stories that made them unique. To remember two lives in this way, to have one memorial service remembering two people, husband and wife, is very rare.

Nelson and Ellen first joined Catonsville Presbyterian Church in 1946 and were active members. They loved the people of this church and gave of themselves in service to the church and the Presbytery of Baltimore. They were inspirational leaders of this congregation. Their membership card tells the story of their service, listing all the times they served on the different boards, Elder, Deacon, and Trustee. The card looks chaotic, actually. They were engaged, curious, passionate. They were avid readers, critical thinkers, engaging both head and heart, like good Presbyterians. They had hearts for justice, for peace, for God's righteousness; they were tireless in their advocacy work. They regularly attended adult education classes and participated in book studies. I think of Ellen's warm, welcoming smile, her big heart. Ellen was a regular on Thursday mornings for Bible study. Nelson sang in the choir. He was the consummate Trustee, helped to guide the renovations of the church building several years ago, and he took care of the sound system, getting the old system to work week after week. He was a miracle worker. Nelson and Ellen were always on the go. Loving, caring, reaching out. I have many fond memories of being with Nelson and Ellen, having many conversations over the years, and even traveling to Scotland together. I remember being in Glenfinnan, in the West of Scotland. Nelson was determined to climb the footpath leading to a spectacular view down Loch Shiel. There's a picture of him standing on a rock, holding his arms up, waving, with a rainbow overhead.

Ellen and Nelson. Together, they each possessed their own spirit. Our relationships shape us, even define us, especially a long and fruitful marriage. But we are also more than our relationships. In healthy relationships and marriages, the individuality of each partner is cherished, preserved, and each is mutually enhanced, not absorbed into the other.

Kahlil Gibran's (1883-1931) marvelous poem "On Marriage," from 1923, offers something to us today. It's often read at weddings but takes on a different meaning in this context. Gibran says:

You shall be together when the white  
wings of death scatter your days.  
Ay, you shall be together even in the  
silent memory of God.  
But let there be spaces in your togetherness,  
And let the winds of the heavens dance  
between you.

Love one another, but make not a bond  
of love:

...  
Give your hearts, but not into each  
other's keeping.  
For only the hand of Life can contain  
your hearts.  
And stand together yet not too near  
together:  
For the pillars of the temple stand apart,  
And the oak tree and the cypress grow  
not in each other's shadow.<sup>2</sup>

Today, we remember and give thanks to God for these two pillars, Nelson and Ellen, and the "temple" they built together and one that we, each in our own way, were blessed to live in too. Here in the holy place, we remember and acknowledge the "hand of Life" that contained and now fully contains their lives. Gibran, who was a Christian, capitalizes "Life" in the poem, which is his way to point to God, the source of life. Our lives are not our own. We do not belong to ourselves. As the apostle Paul said, "If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's" (Romans 14:8). Life is granted by the will of another. We are not the source. We are not our own but belong, body and soul, both in life and in death, to a savior who is always faithful to us. And so we place their lives, both individually and together, into the larger Life of God. The God who created and still recreates us, and calls us, and gives us a calling to use our lives, to make a difference, to walk in the way of the good, guarding the paths of justice (Proverbs 2:20), advocating for justice, fairness, wholeness, equity, rights, working for change, for healing—for *peace*. A life, two lives, well-lived. "Well done thou good and faithful servants. Enjoy into the joy of your Lord" (Matthew 25:23). Lives well-lived—all for the glory of God. Thanks be to God. *Amen*.

---

<sup>1</sup> C. G. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (New York: Harcourt, 1933/1955).

<sup>2</sup> Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet* (New York: Knopf, 1923).