

Marie Neff's Memorial Service – November 18, 2015

Prelude music

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God, and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Please be seated.

Welcome. On behalf of all of us at First Presbyterian and First Christian Churches, we're glad you're here. To remember. Celebrate. Honor. And tell some stories about Marie Neff. She was born nearly 90 years ago in Post Texas. She was a West Texas original. And you can spot 'em miles and miles away – it's a long way to the horizon in Garza County.

Marie personified West Texas spirit and independence. And if you didn't want to know what she thought or believed, don't ask. But you should. Because the things she knew and believed were worth knowing. Her knowledge of the land, it's history, the people who settled our town and who have made it great through the years.

She married Ed in 1946. Together I think – I imagine really – they lived what Marie has called the Dream of Love. It is by her request that this event include Franz Lizst's wonderful musical setting to that sentiment – Liebestraum. Dream of love. It came true for Marie and Ed. Her legacy is one of love. Love of the land, country, family. Through Ed, she was the grand niece of Governor Pat Neff, later president of Baylor University, and about whom she held fond memories and affection.

She was a long time stalwart of the “sisterhood” known as the Art Guild. So much so that her family has asked that memorials in her name be directed there. And her list of collaborations and memberships go on and on. Chamber of Commerce. Merchant’s Association. Caprock Cultural Association. OS and Post Historical Society Museums. Woman of the Year.

She was an artist and an art teacher. With an eye for the aesthetic, order, color, and beauty. In the land and in within the people she loved.

With Ed, she raised Charlie and Jim. And from them she knew and loved Robin, Jenny, Joshua, and Katie.

That is her of love. A dream of love come true. Let us pray:

Prayer: Our God of grace and glory, we remember and honor Marie today and we thank you for giving her to us to know and to love. By your compassionate presence, console us in our mourning. Inspire in us the confidence of a certain faith, the comfort of holy hope, and the peace which passes all understanding; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Scripture readings

Psalm 121

I lift up mine eyes unto the hills. From whence cometh my help? My help cometh from the Lord, who made the heavens and the earth. He will not let your

foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade on your right hand. The sun shall not smite you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will watch over your going out and your coming in from this time forth and for evermore.

Psalm 23

The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul. He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Ye though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies. Thou annointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

John 14:1-3.

Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so would I have told you that I go and prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, that where I am, you may be also.

About Marie – Linda Puckett

Musical selection – “Liebestraum,” Franz Liszt.

Prayer and Lord’s Prayer

God of all grace, source of all love. We thank you for the grace and love you have shown us by Marie’s life among us. May we so honor you as we honor Marie by living together as she taught us and led us, with wisdom, service, and humor. This we pray in Jesus name, who also taught us to pray together:

***Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation. But deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory
Forever and ever. Amen.***

Scripture and Sermon

38 Now as they went on their way, he entered a village; and a woman named Martha received him into her house. **39** And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. **40** But Martha was distracted with much serving; and she went to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." **41** But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; **42** one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her."

At the outset – a little Biblical theology. The stories Jesus tells – parables and the like – and the stories told about him and others – the good Samaritan, Prodigal Son, and this story about Mary and Martha – are designed to tell us more about Jesus than about the characters involved. The Mary and Martha story tells us who Jesus is primarily, and why it's important to listen to him. Then comes the implications about how we might respond as did the other characters in the story. And I think Martha gets a bad rap here. We typically see virtue in Mary and judge Martha for sweating the small stuff. For she is distracted by “much serving,” so says the text. But the Greek work for “serve” is diakonia – which is the derivative of deacon, feminized deaconess, and is a central office in most any Christian church. We all serve. The Mary and Martha story defines a continuum rather than two rigid categories. And although her name is derived from Mary, Marie leans toward the quintessential Martha. Thank God.

Marie served. Marie served the museum with her wisdom. She made it her business to know to the smallest detail, the place from which an artifact came. A factoid or two about the artist or craftsman. Another set of facts about the culture out of which an art form emerged, and how it defined its people. The way she told those stories helped us understand more about our own time and place. The OS museum is where you learned about you and your world, and how art and craftsmanship brought them together. Marie's wisdom and her ability to teach served every patron, every time. Marie served wisdom.

Marie served our community not only with wisdom but also with generosity and good humor. Peggy Ashley tells of walking her third graders over to the museum to see the

dramatic changes in displays around Christmas and Easter. The crèches and the eggs. And everything in between. Peggy tells the story this way: “She would have the class mesmerized with her stories about each piece of art in each case, their creators and the process Giles used to get them to Post. I never remember any child asking a question that she couldn't supply an answer/story. She was pretty awesome when it came to the history of all those collections. But I think, her favorite act at the end of each tour was to open the bottom drawer of the jewelry cabinet and reveal the leathery ole Gila monster. The kids would squeal and she would grin.” Then she would give them a piece of candy and down the stairs we went.”

Marie served the community – and she served the candy.

Finally, Marie served her Lord. She served her Lord by living out her vocation as an artist. This goes beyond the specifics of what she did. Her background and mindset enabled her to use the time and space at the museum to express who she was as a child of God. She not only had a mind for detail, but also an eye for artistic precision. “Move that egg one millimeter to the left.” “Make that ½ millimeter.” Just right. No one ever had to wonder if a piece in a display case, or a sculpture on the floor, or a painting on the wall was where it belonged. Marie's artistry made the whole place an integrated sculpture. That was her gift. Her calling. And one thing more. The occasional twinkle in the eye. An eye for a good laugh.

My brother-in-law and I together own a beaten up piece of plastic – it's an unbelievably tacky bright red Christmas ornament. I honestly can't fully describe how cheap and trashy this thing is. And we present it to one another, back and forth from time to time, in creative and surprising ways.

Well, he had it one time and it was my turn to get it. They were visiting from Wisconsin some years back, and part of the trip included going to the museum to see the Easter set-up. Which I had seen many times before and on that day was somewhat less than enthused. But what to my wondering eyes should appear – Marie had placed this hideous thing – precisely placed this hideous thing – behind the glass in the center case, an inch from a priceless Fabrege egg. That’s where I saw it. And I knew I’d been had. By my brother-in-law, in cahoots with Marie. The artist. Who served. Who laughed and loved by serving her Lord.

We probably most remember Jesus’ rebuke to Martha in the story. He says “Mary has chosen the good portion.” I don’t think the Good portion, which is what Jesus taught all of us about love, grace, and forgiveness, was ever lost on Marie. And now she has it all in full measure. After visiting her in the hospital early last week, a friend reported Marie’s conversation with her doctor. In typical fashion she asked him point blank, “When can I go home.” I’m told the doctor said, “You’ll go home when you’re ready.”

She was ready last Saturday evening. And now she has seen the good portion. She’s safe at home in the mansion He has prepared. She’s probably also rearranging the candles. One millimeter to the left, please. Wait a minute, Gabriel. Make that ½ millimeter. Perfect.

Amen.

Prayer and benediction

To Honor Marie, - Go into the world in peace. Have courage. Hold onto what is good. Return to no-one evil for evil. Strengthen the fainthearted, support the

weak, help the suffering. Honor all people. Speak and act with love on your lips and in your heart.

For it is into your hands O merciful Savior that we commend Marie, your servant. Acknowledge her we pray, a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock. Receive her into the arms of your mercy, into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the glorious company of all the saints in light. Amen.

Let us go in Peace.

Postlude