

Isaiah 40: 1--12
Psalm 23
Revelation 7: 9-17
John 10: 11-16

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Year C

Lit by Love

My the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer, Amen.

The Dalai Lama has famously said, "My religion is kindness." He must have known Lois Sibley. Of course she was religious and deeply so but kindness, love, compassion and generosity were rivers that flowed forth from her tender soul, blessing the world around her with abundance.

I knew Lois through the Wednesday Healing Services here at St. Peter's for a year or so before she died. She was physically fragile, frail, and, at times, mentally between here and there. I thought of her as a feather, floating on love and she was luminous to behold. Because it seemed that when so much was gone, what remained was the bright light of her love. Not only hers, but Larry's. Larry's devotion to Lois was tender, steadfast, and luminous. They continued to come to church together on Sundays as they had for decades, This, I realized was a couple still lit by love-- after 65 years of marriage.

In the stories her friends have shared with me about Lois, kindness is at the very core.

"Knit together in love" was the title of a reflection Lois wrote for a book of daily meditations called "Walking with God."

"Knit together. If you knit as I do," Lois wrote, "You know how strong a knitted project is. You cannot break or tear it. Once knit together it stays knit...Saint Paul says that we who believe in Jesus are "knit together in love."

Lois knit worlds together in love. First was the family she and Larry created: their five beloved children, Anne, David, Mary, John and Martha, blessed them with a world of grandchildren, 21 of them, whom Lois knit together into the family one-by-one as they came along. That might have been enough parenting and nurturing for most women, but not Lois.

Over the years, Lois also watched over like a gentle shepherd, a flock of babies, 32 in fact, who came into her home several days after birth and stayed until there was a safe and permanent place for them.

"The image I have of Lois is her holding one of the babies in her arms during the service and providing the child with a sense of love and trust that was deeply needed," remembers her friend, Linda Toia.

Could you imagine a more loving start in this world than being knit into Lois's heart and nurtured there even if only for a few months? Change the pronoun and the words from Isaiah capture Lois exquisitely:

"She tends her flock like a shepherd; She gathers the lambs in her arms and carries them close to her heart."

Shirley Smith remembers often being surprised by a knock on her door before breakfast during her late husband, Fred's, long illness. It was Lois with freshly baked muffins still warm from the oven. "Just like a good shepherd," Shirley said.

Close to her heart for Lois was her St. Peter's family whom she "knit together in love" practicing "radical welcome" long before it became a mantra in the church.

Mary Rivera was new to St. Peter's and she said no one welcomed her like Lois. "She taught me to knit which took the patience of Job." A fast friendship formed through "Knit Wits" the group Lois started that still makes prayer shawls for parishioners who were homebound or ill. Mary remembers how proud Lois was of her family and grandchildren. "Her house was full of baby toys, rocking chairs and rocking horses, Mary said. "She told me about her foster babies. She had pictures of most of them and when they left her home it was with a knitted wardrobe Lois made for them."

Audrey Kipphut summed up the feelings of many at St. Peter's when she said simply that "It was an honor to be a member of the same church as Lois."

While Lois, the good shepherd, poured out her life in kindness and generosity to those in her flock, her remarkable life embraced even more.

Lois was a writer of magazine articles, book reviews and newsletters. She was also an accomplished editor and served as a sub-deacon at St. Mark's and as a Eucharist Minister here at St. Peter's, among all the other ministries like the Altar Guild that were blessed to have her.

The Episcopal Church offered to Lois what she offered to so many: a place of belonging. Lois discovered that she was valued as a lay woman in the Episcopal Church, fully participating in worship, ministry, and lay leadership unlike the more conservative religious tradition she came from which excluded women from those roles.

Our former rector, The Reverend Emily Richards, knew Lois well. She'd hoped to be here today but she's recovering from Covid and shared these thoughts:

What I remember most about Lois was that she believed strongly in the deep power of prayer. She was a faithful attendee at the Wednesday Healing Service and took communion to people for years. Early on when I was first at St. Peter's I went along with Lois and she introduced me to homebound parishioners some of whom I continued to visit on my own,

One woman said as we were concluding our time together, said politely, I don't need you anymore, Emily, I need Lois.

Emily said that Lois "really helped me on my journey of faith, and helped me understand more fully what I believe." She continued:

If Lois disagreed with my preaching or with something in the liturgy, she'd call me up and say "Let's talk." For example, Lois disagreed with me on letting anyone come to communion, I had to think through why I believe what I believe and while we didn't always agree, we were always willing to engage in conversation with each other. She took liturgy so seriously. I respected her deep faithfulness and devotion to liturgy and prayer. It mattered so much to her. Lois took her baptized ministry very seriously.

Emily said that Lois's faith was unwavering and despite whatever suffering came her way, she remained so deeply connected to God through prayer that faith steadied her. "It was humbling to take her communion at the end of her life," Emily said, "because I knew how deeply it mattered to her."

Lit by love, Lois's light never dimmed. Her love of Jesus, her love for her husband, her children, grandchildren, and the legions of babies she tended and nurtured sustained her and fueled the love she poured into her life of faith and her years of lay ministry to the church.

That was the light of love I saw burning in her at the Wednesday Healing Services week after week. It was Lois at her purest. Didn't matter that she was frail or forgetful. What mattered most was there until the very end—the enormity of her love, which created a web of belonging for all those in her flock whom she knitted together, stitch by stitch, row by row, year after year.

On this day, when with her husband, family, and friends we miss, mourn, and celebrate the life of Lois Sibley, we also give thanks to God for knitting us together with her, in love. AMEN