

**IN-HOUSE**  
Matthew 13:34, 36-37a

*A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on the Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, July 27, 2008, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. This sermon was given at the regular worship service following the sudden death of Associate Pastor Karen Blomberg the previous Monday.*

**Focus Text**

*Jesus told **the crowd** all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing....Then he **left the crowds and went into the house**. And his **disciples** approached him, saying, ‘Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.’ He answered...*

In the Gospel of Matthew, there are significant times when Jesus follows his teaching or healing among the *crowds* with a *private conversation* with his disciples.

- To *disciples* alone he explains the meaning of the Parable of the Sower and the Parable of the Weeds.<sup>1</sup>
- To *disciples* alone he asks “Who do people say that I am?” and then “Who do you say that I am?”<sup>2</sup>
- To *disciples* alone he says: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”<sup>3</sup>

At appropriate times and places, when the situation warrants, Jesus closes the doors of the church, sits down with his disciples, and has an “in-house” conversation.

For the next few minutes, we are going to have an “in-house” conversation.

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This afternoon, the doors of our church will be wide open: for friends and family, clients and patients, authenticity practitioners, Presbyterian ministers and ministers from other denominations who were comforted, counseled, consoled and challenged by Karen Blomberg during her nearly twenty years in the Washington area.

- Some who come to her memorial service this afternoon will not have been in a church in years.
- It may be the first time ever for some.
- Some are likely to be clients who came to Karen for counseling at sometime in their life and who, because of the confidential nature of the therapeutic process, never shared that fact with anyone else.

All who come this afternoon will be people who knew her in one or more of the many strands that made up her life – strands which only gather in one place at one time to remember her in her death.

It will be a public event, a public memorial, a public worship service. And we are its hosts. Opening the doors of the church is our responsibility, our sacred calling, this afternoon.

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But before we exercise that calling, it is appropriate to close the doors for a few minutes to have an “in-house” conversation about what Karen meant to us, what we feel, what sense we make of her sudden yet beautiful death.

First, what happened? The facts are these.

- Karen was on her second “Vision Quest,” this one in the Inyo Mountains of Northern California. She was camping with fifteen other women at a place called Badger Flats, 9000 feet above Independence, California.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 13:18-23, 36-43.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 16:13-15.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 16:24.

- At 6:00 a.m. Monday, as the group was gathering to begin their day, Karen called out from her tent that she was having trouble breathing.
- She did not indicate, as an Associated Press story reported, that she was having chest pains.
- She managed to get out of her tent, and the fifteen other women in the group gathered around her and gave her CPR.
- Within minutes she breathed her last breath.
- She was surrounded by her retreat-mates, who held her, prayed with her, and continued to administer CPR as they transported her down the mountain.
- She was pronounced dead at 8:00 a.m.
- She had donated many of her organs to medicine; an autopsy ruled the cause of death as a pulmonary embolism, a blood clot.
- Her death was quick and relatively painless.
- She died in the company of people with whom she was close on a mountain that had become sacred to her.
- I will tell you from my knowledge of her as a colleague, she died following a period of enormous personal growth, terrific professional achievement, and tremendous spiritual energy. She died in the prime of her life, a time where she was really coming into her own.

Even as we are baffled and saddened by her death, for its circumstances, and for where she was in her life, we can give thanks to God.

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Second, what does her death mean?

I have always said that any religion – or any minister – who claims to know the meaning of tragedy is making a false claim.

I cannot, as your minister, tell you why God allowed Karen Blomberg to die this week, or even if God makes such decisions on a day-to-day basis.

- I can tell you that I am shocked
- I am sad.
- I am grieving.
- I am mad.
- I can tell you that I am grateful to have known her and worked with her for four years of my life.
- I can tell you all these things, but I cannot claim to know the mind of God nor explain God's mind to you.

*I resolve it this way: We can only know the presence of God in times like these; we cannot fathom the ways of God.*

And it is to God's presence that we turn.

- In worship
- In the community of this church
- In song
- In silence
- In prayer
- In gratitude
- In sadness
- In anger
- In hope
- In resolve
- In intentionality.

Anything that we need to do to honor Karen Blomberg or to mourn her loss is appropriate. Any way that we turn to God is a way acceptable to God. God can handle our grief, in all its form. God will be present to us. Even if what we feel is

anger or absence, we can express these to God; and trust, that in God's time and way, God will hear, God will respond, God will visit.

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Third, what are we to do? This one is relatively easy.

We mourn.

We remember.

We welcome others to our Sanctuary this afternoon.

And slowly but surely we pick up where Karen left off.

Westminster has been here before.

- In 1970, longtime pastor Cliff Johnson died after a three-month illness. He was in his early fifties.
- In 1979, his successor Don Campbell died on the tennis courts at Chatauqua, no warning, also in his fifties.

Even as someone else came to fill their responsibilities, someone else will come to fill Karen's. But as their successors did not "replace" them, we will not "replace" Karen, for every minister, every human being, every member of this church is a unique person, a unique child of God, who cannot be duplicated or replaced!

What we will do is continue to learn what Karen taught us, take it into our day, our time, our new and unfolding situations, grateful for what she gave us, grateful for what God gave us through her.

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After I finished this sermon yesterday afternoon and was checking email, I heard the "ding" alerting me of one more email that had come. Like so many emails this week, this one came from people out of town on vacation, expressing sadness and support. But this one also had a story, a story that begged to be added to the "what-I-thought-was-complete-sermon." It email was from Steve and Susan Cloud. I quote directly:

Karen has always been a special part of Westminster,...but she also was special to us because she baptized Sam...Sam was 10 months old and wasn't talking too much but had a few good phrases in his repertoire of words. When Karen asked "Samuel Maurice Cloud and his parents, Susan and Steve Cloud to come forward for the baptism," Sam responded by yelling "Uh Oh!" Karen of course lit up and we all had a good laugh.

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Seven days ago you had four pastors who love you. Today you have three. But love is not something that grows or shrinks with numbers. It is a quality, a commitment, or as Karen would say, an energy.

- Love grows when times are good.
- Love is strengthened when times are marked by sorrow and tragedy.

The love in this congregation – for God, for one another, for people in this community and for people as far away as our Moi's Bridge Orphanage in Kenya – will grow in the days and weeks and decades ahead. Love's growth will bring a smile to the face of God, a smile to the heart of our departed friend and pastor and mentor.

Amen.