

Full Life with the Good Shepherd

In the Name of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, dear fellow sheep, friends and loved ones of Ardell Mathews:

When we met at the funeral home on Wednesday, the place was packed. Our funeral director said it was the funeral of a child. Your heart just goes out to friends and family when a life is cut short so soon. May God point them all to Christ, the sure and certain comfort for our souls.

We come to the end of a life well lived and celebrate God's gift of 94 years for Ardell Mathews. The biggest surprise is that folks didn't realize she was 94. Maybe late seventies, early eighties, but 94? Ardell enjoyed reading, daily devotions, the newspaper; cooking, watching *Jeopardy*, cleaning, church; playing dominoes and card games. Ardell worked various secretarial jobs, worked in agriculture for the Federal Government. She enjoyed visiting folks in her apartment building. She seemed forever young in her enjoyment of sports, cheering for the helmeted "Cheese heads" from across the river. She volunteered at our Mission Wear House Thrift Store in Little Canada. Many of these things Ardell did with her sister Virginia whom the Lord called home almost five years ago. Anyone would say, "Ardell lived a full life."

But what made her life so different? The world is full of negative people. Sometimes it's really hard not to be one yourself. Why was it that whenever you talked to Ardell Mathews, you came away feeling better than before? One might say she had no family of her own, but Ardell would correct that. She did have family. The lifelong companionship of sister Virginia, friends and neighbors, cousins, nephews, nieces, especially devoted niece Jan who was there right up to the end to assure Ardell she was loved. To be totally honest, you'd have to say that love permeated Ardell's life from youth to old age. Without question I can tell you that Ardell would want you to know where that love came from so you can have the full measure of it yourself. This kind of love only grows bigger as it is shared and enjoyed.

To really understand, let's go back to sit in Ardell's Sunday School class at old Trinity Lutheran Church in St. Paul. Can't you just hear her saying, "Children, we are all sinners." At all ages we have to be convinced of what that really means because – you know how kids are. "He did it! She did it!" Or at least "Somebody else – but not me! I'm fine and good the way I am." But Ardell would totally agree with the Lord's Apostle Paul where he quotes from various Old Testament Scriptures in Romans 3: ***"As it is written: 'There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.' 'Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit.' 'The poison of vipers is on their lips.' 'Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. ' 'Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know. ' 'There is no fear of God before their eyes.' ...For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."*** Ardell would echo Paul's appraisal of himself, ***"What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!"*** (Romans 3:10-18,23f ; 7:24f NIV84)

Ardell would want you to know that the goodness and love you experienced from her did not come from inside her. It was a gift God gave her by grace when God had her born again by the Holy Spirit's washing of rebirth and renewal in her baptism. ***"He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life."*** (Titus 3:5-7 NIV84)

How sure and certain is this hope of God's love in Christ for you? That's emphasized twice in our text from the Good Shepherd chapter, John 10. Did you catch that in the EHV translation? ***"Amen,***

Amen, I tell you...” ⁶ *Jesus used this illustration in speaking to the people, but they did not understand what he was telling them.* ⁷ *So Jesus said again, “Amen, Amen, I tell you....I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”* ¹ Or more literally, “*in order that they may have life and have it in overflowing abundance.*” Usually, people say, “Amen,” at the end of a prayer, sealing the prayer as absolutely certain and sure. But Jesus used this Hebrew word at the beginning of a statement, twenty-five times in the Gospel account of John. This was unique even in Jesus’ day. The Holy Spirit inspired John to transliterate the Hebrew word Jesus spoke, instead of using a Greek term. The EHV does the same in English to emphasize Jesus’ meaning: “I solemnly tell you the truth.” One person pointed out, “Jesus says one *Amen* for Himself and one *Amen* for his hearers.” It’s a double dose of absolute certainty.

Unless you spent some serious time herding sheep, you might not understand how intimately the life of a sheep is wrapped up with its shepherd. Everything depends on his skill and care. In fact, here in the West where shepherds herd sheep with dogs, we still don’t see the eastern shepherd Jesus describes here. So imagine mixed flocks in a sheep fold, all fenced in together. How will an eastern shepherd separate out his sheep? He simply walks in among them and starts talking. They follow him out into the open country because they know the sound of his voice. A stranger even saying their names cannot accomplish this. There’s a close and intimate relationship between the shepherd and his sheep.

A pastor friend took care of his uncle’s sheep years ago. He described how they came to a few yards of paved country road, covered by just ½ inch of water from recent rain. No matter what he did, he could not get the sheep to cross that harmless little stretch. They didn’t know how deep it was! And they did not know his voice. Finally, he physically carried a sheep across. Then they all followed.

Can you see what love was warming Ardell’s life in the care of the Good Shepherd? She heard His voice through faithful pastors all her life. If any of us had started telling stories “out of school,” giving our own opinion instead of God’s Word, Ardell would have gone somewhere else. But as long as she could hear Jesus talking through her pastors, she was eager to be in God’s house with the rest of His flock as often as she could. And when she could not be here physically, her spirit was always in the arms of her loving Lord and Savior. “*Amen, Amen, I tell you: I am the door for the sheep.*” ⁸ *All who came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them.* ⁹ *I am the door. Whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture.* ¹⁰ *A thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*”

Jesus accomplished this life-giving salvation, this rescue from sin, from self, from guilt, from shame as He describes in later verses: “*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep....The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.*” (John 10:11,17f NIV84) Jesus willingly gave up His life on the cross even for all who still reject Him. But by trusting God’s Word of promise, you can have the benefits of Christ’s death and resurrection. “*He died for all!*” Surely, He died for you!

Again, later to His enemies, Jesus spoke these comforting words, “*My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.*” (10:27f NIV84) Ardell’s eternal life with Jesus began already at her baptism. It now extends beyond the grave to heaven where Jesus will soon reunite her soul and body to live forever with the Lord. Today Ardell is home in heaven enjoying **Full Life with the Good Shepherd** beyond our wildest imagination, way past our ability to comprehend.

There is no better way to honor her memory than to follow her good example. Life and love and blessing from God are infinite treasures of heaven. Think of a water tower stretching high into the sky with the bubble far beyond space. Drink this living water from Word and Sacraments and you will never run out of **Full Life with the Good Shepherd** – life in overflowing abundance for all His flock. Amen

¹ *Evangelical Heritage Version, EHV*® © 2017 *The Wartburg Project*. www.wartburgproject.org. Quotes unless noted. For *The Preacher’s Apprentice (TPA)* sermon study or copies: m.cordes@comast.net. New Life Evangelical Lutheran Church You can also call: 651-484-1169. Hear the sermon at www.wels.us/newlife. 180 County Rd F - Shoreview, MN 55126