

A Reflection on the Life of Pam Fulton
Romans 8: 31-39

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A group of folks from the Suttons Bay church were evaluating a sermon I preached for a continuing education requirement. There were about nine people sitting around the table, each one taking a turn at offering a critique. The comments were kind, affirmative, and supportive. And while I appreciate kind, affirmative, and supportive, I confess that I was a bit baffled because I had been quite displeased with the sermon in question. Now I'm guessing that those of you here this morning who are ministers know exactly what I'm talking about. There are those Sundays when you walk to the pulpit with your head held high, looking forward to hearing your own voice proclaim the brilliant insights you've garnered and the witty turns of phrase you've crafted. But, the sermon fall flat and the folks greeting you at the door comment on the weather. Then there are those Sundays when church starts a couple of minutes late because you were in your office trying to salvage something from the rubbish you'd scribbled on the page and it takes all the willpower you can garner to even walk into the sanctuary. And on that day, the folks greeting you at the door say things like, "Oh pastor, it's like you were talking right to me" or "That sermon changed my life." And you're just stymied because you thought it stunk. Well, at said meeting, I was having the latter experience, wondering how such good, intelligent, and insightful people could possibly have found anything kind to say about that sermon. I sat in stunned silence until we got to Pam. She waited to speak until everyone else had taken and turn and then said, "I was bored. My mind wandered. I was distracted by the glare from your glasses. I've heard about 15 variations of that same sermon."

Everyone at the table expressed his or her own truth about that sermon and while I was thankful to all of them, it was Pam's comment that I best remember, Pam's perspective that I most needed to hear. And though her response was critical, I wasn't offended or defensive because I respect Pam's opinion and appreciate the ways in which she speaks the truth in love. I knew that Pam was at that table, first and foremost, because she believed in me and wanted me to be better at that which she knew I love to do. That was just her way. Whether one-on-one or as the leader of a congregation or, I would hazard to guess, as a mother, Pam helped all of us to be better, more responsible, more loving, and more effective. And it's not as if she tried to change any of us into what SHE thought we should be. Rather, she helped us to better understand what God wanted us to be and then empowered us to be it.

Pam's brother Bill explained that Pam's commitment to helping people to be their best selves started early and that he was her guinea pig. She was four years his senior and provided him with loving guidance, especially when their parents were challenged to do so. When they were children, Bill and Pam had a pact that they wouldn't snitch on each other. And so when Bill stole a pen from the local store, he thought it safe to confide his misdeed to Pam. She told him he must go back to the store and return the pen or else she would break the pact and tell their parents. It wasn't until many years later that Bill discovered the real truth of what had happened, Pam had conspired with their parents to get him to do the right thing and return the pen.

Back then Pam conspired with her parents to get her brother to do the right thing and later in life I can't help but feel that Pam conspired with God to get all of us to the right things. Indeed, Pam's commitment to helping people to be their best selves and live the lives God calls them to

live didn't stop with family and friends. It extended into the wider community. Honestly, that woman was impossible to say no to and even more impossible not to love. I imagine that's what made it possible, along with her incredible work ethic and commitment to justice and peace, for her to be the founder of Advent House—an organization that, to this day, provides day shelter, hot meals, parenting programs, housing assistance, and job training to folks who are struggling in a tough Lansing neighborhood. The work that Pam began doing as an older sister continued as she evolved and learned throughout her life. So many times she put flesh on the word of God, knowing as she did that “We love because God first loved us. If anyone says, “I love God,” yet hates brother or sister, that person lies. For anyone who does not love brother and sister, whom can be seen, cannot love God, whom cannot be seen. And Jesus has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love God's children.” Pam loved God, and Pam loved us and whole bunches of other people too. As a clergy colleague said, “Pam had a huge embrace.”

And not only did Pam embrace us all—even the least among us—she encouraged us to do the same. A few months ago, Corey and I found ourselves in the position to take in a family in need of shelter for a few weeks. I did not agree to do it because I wanted to do it—I agreed to do it because Pam had told me stories about the myriad of people she and Ed had taken in and sheltered over the years and I wouldn't have been able to look her straight in the eye ever again for fear that she would see the selfish coward lurking inside me. Indeed, the stories Pam most often told me were not about her immensely successful children—though she was proud of you, or her dear grandchildren—though she loved you all so dearly, nor even of her own distinguished past—indeed I did not even know she had a masters degree in public policy—that she earned while also raising five children—until I read it in her obituary. The stories Pam most often told were the success stories of the young women who had participated in the parenting courses she organized while she was in seminary or of the folks who had been able to make a life for themselves after they began coming to Advent House. Pam cast her net of caring deep and wide and we all know it because at some point we got ensnared in that net and we've found ourselves doing strange things like taking in homeless families, being a Youth Friend, walking in the CROP walk, building houses with Habitat, or doing whatever it is we do for others because Pam first loved us, we've been doing these crazy things ever since!

Further testimony to her impact on our lives is not just our presence at this service, but also the fact that so many of us know others who are present here as well. Pam had an uncanny ability not just to ensnare people in her net, she also brought the folks in that net together into relationships with one another. The lady leadership of this service is a prime example. Soon after I met Pam she called and invited me to lunch so that I could meet one Becky Chamberlain and Linda, if you lived closer, I'm sure you would have been invited as well. Pam was a master at using her interests, passions, and connections to bring people together. Pam loved to read and a few months after moving here she started a women's book group. Pam was passionate about participating in the democratic, political process—as such she was the first person in Leelanau County to organize a Howard Dean Meet-Up, even though she and Ed had been living here for less than a year. Recently, Pam saw a need for women who care for spouses with chronic health issues to get help and respite and so she organized a support group. Pam wanted to take a water aerobics class but there wasn't one that suited her needs and so at the age of 69 she signed up to become a water aerobics instructor for the first time in her life. These are the things she did in the past 5 years, and only the ones about which I know. Faith and Santiago would be late to their

wedding this afternoon if I even tried to name the rest of the networks of caring and support she established over the years as she helped others to learn and grow even as she continued, to the very end of her life, to learn and grow.

The morning of her death, Ed, Lynn, Bill, and most of Pam's children reflected on her life and they each had a story to tell and a memory to share. And while all of them revealed their love and admiration for Pam, there was one story in particular that I'll never forget—and of course, it was about the one son whose flight hadn't landed yet and so he didn't get a chance to tell his side of things. As his sisters tell the story, he was going through a tough time in his childhood and was quite angry and regularly acting out. One day, in a state of utter frustration and angst he said to Pam, "What would you do if I cut off your arm?" And Pam replied, "I'll always love you." "Well, what would you do if I cut off your other arm?" "I'll always love you." "What would you do if I cut off your leg?" "I'll always love you." "What would you do if I cut off both your legs?" "I'll always love you." And so it went, he issuing one challenge after another and Pam never wavering, always reassuring her son that she would always love him—even if he cut both her arms off and she couldn't even hug him—she would still love him. It is the love of a mother for a child, the love of God for us all and so is it any wonder that Pam's favorite Bible verse was "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." And while that's how the Apostle Paul describes deep and abiding love, the kind of love that comes from God and was expressed in Pam's response to her son, and indeed to all of us, there is another helpful description of that kind of love—a description that as a lover of small children and as an appreciator of good books, I think Pam would have liked. Indeed, it's a book that will always make me stop and thank God for Pam, thank God for Pam and her amazing capacity to love, for surely this book describes the way she loved.

The Runaway Bunny by Margaret Wise Brown

Once there was a little bunny who wanted to run away so he said to his mother, "I am running away."

"If you run away," said his mother, "I will run after you. For you are my little bunny."

"If you run after me," said the little bunny, "I will become a fish in a trout stream and I will swim away from you."

"If you become a fish in a trout stream," said his mother, "I will become a fisherman and I will fish for you."

"If you become a fisherman," said the little bunny, "I will become a rock on the mountain high above you."

"If you become a rock on the mountain high above me," said his mother, "I will be a mountain climber and I will climb to where you are."

"If you become a mountain climber," said the little bunny, "I will be a crocus in a hidden garden."

"If you become a crocus in a hidden garden," said his mother, "I will be a gardener and I will find you."

"If you become a gardener and find me," said the little bunny, "I will be a bird and fly away from you."

“If you become a bird and fly away from me,” said his mother, “I will be a tree that you come home to.”

“If you become a tree,” said the little bunny, “I will become a little sail boat and I will sail away from you.”

“If you become a sail boat and sail away from me,” said his mother, “I will become the wind and blow you to where I want you to go.”

“If you become the wind and blow me [to where you want me to go],” said the little bunny, “I will join a circus and fly away on a flying trapeze.”

“If you go flying on a flying trapeze,” said his mother, “I will be a tight rope walker, and I will walk across the air to you.”

”If you become a tight rope walker and walk across the air,” said the little bunny, “I will become a little boy and run into a house.”

“If you become a little boy and run into a house,” said the mother bunny, “I will become your mother and catch you in my arms and hug you.”

“Shucks,” said the little bunny, “I might just as well stay where I am and be your little bunny.”
And so he did.

“Have a carrot,” said the mother bunny.