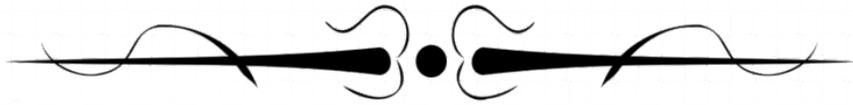


Phyllis E. Olson



June 29, 1929 — May 13, 2021

Gene, Chris, Gerry, Shari, family and friends, grace, and peace to you from the one who lived for us, who died for us, and who now claims victory over every grave, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.



The Apostle Paul in Romans talks about the personal gifts in our lives. He writes: “We are one body in Christ. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.”

We are gathered here today to remember and honor a very special teacher in our lives: Phyllis Elaine Ostlund Olson. As I’ve come to know Phyllis over the years, she might not have been the most boisterous or dramatic teacher a student ever had, but you know she cared deeply for her students. And sometimes those students were her own children.

How did Phyllis become a teacher? She grew up in south Minneapolis. She was a high school sweetheart of a young man named Eugene Olson. Eugene was a hard worker. Phyllis was too. This was during the Depression. Their families did everything they could to make ends meet. Somehow, they made it through the tough times. After high school, Eugene went off to trade school at Dunwoody. He liked to fix things, and in particular televisions and electronics. Phyllis went off to college at Macalester. She was soon drawn to education. She wanted to be a teacher, and not just any teacher, but an elementary school teacher. Maybe even kindergarten. Phyllis was ahead of time. This was before we knew just how important kindergarten was in early childhood development.

Phyllis and Eugene got married on August 11, 1950. Before you know it, little Gene came along, and soon after that came Gerry. They moved to Howard Lake. Eugene owned and operated a TV and electronics store. Phyllis tended to home life and she also started a career in teaching. That was her gift, after all.

Family life was busy and full. The boys were in scouts. Phyllis was a den mother. The boys got involved in sports – baseball, football, track. They were in band. Gene played the trumpet, Gerry the saxophone. Boys being boys, I have a hunch that more than a few times Phyllis had to nudge them to get their homework done and practice their music lessons. I also have a hunch that she and Eugene were enthusiastic attenders of almost all their sporting events and concerts.

The family joined a Lutheran church in Howard Lake. Phyllis made sure the kids went to Sunday School. She even taught Sunday School for a number of years. Confirmation was part of their faith development too.

The family home was only a few blocks away from Howard Lake itself. One of Phyllis’ rules was that the boys had to be skilled in water safety and lifeguarding if they wanted to go out in the boat. That was a must!

Phyllis kept an eye on her boys. In fact, she often found out how they were doing in their classes at school – a

test or a paper – long before they did. If the boys acted up at home – imagine that – she regularly resorted to an old standby: “Just wait till your father gets home.” Occasionally mom would even point to paddle on the wall in case they needed some incentive. Those were the good old days, right?

There was time for fun too. Phyllis took the boys out waterskiing when Eugene was tied up at work. They built a cabin on Lake Ida near Alexandria. They took vacations to faraway places like Florida and the Alamo in Texas.

In the early 1970s the family moved to Rochester. They joined Zumbro. Eugene got a job with Magnavox. He was in engineering and sales. He helped those in repair shops learn how to fix TVs. Phyllis, for her part, kept right on teaching kindergarten. She got involved in a master’s program in education at the University of Minnesota. There were lots of trips to the Twin Cities and back. Phyllis’ master’s thesis was on children’s literature.

The boys grew up. They received lots of encouragement at home to further their education, which they did. Eventually they started families of their own. Phyllis’ one bit of advice to her boys was to go to the same church as their spouses if at all possible. Their religious life would be easier, especially for the kids.

Grandchildren came along. Guess who was a favorite with those grandchildren? Grandma Phyllis. There was always a project to do, a game to play, a book to read, some gingerbread cookies to bake. As the grandkids got a little older, they even got to go to something called “Grandma Camp,” which I’m sure was a highlight of the summer.

The years passed. Phyllis retired from teaching. She got involved in ceramics. She and Eugene started a craft business together. They were coming up on 60 years of marriage and more. Sadly, Eugene’s health began to fail. His memory grew dim. Phyllis was no longer able to provide all the care he needed, so he lived at Madonna Towers for a time. And then he was gone.

Phyllis lived in the family home out in the country for a while. She thought she could stay there. She didn’t want to leave the woods. But there were hills to maneuver and stairs to climb. Within a year or so, Phyllis made the decision to move to Shorewood. That’s where I got to know her. She was a regular at the monthly worship service I did in the Wedum Room. She always had a peaceful look on her face and a warm smile.

I led a worship service at Shorewood two weeks ago. I notice Phyllis wasn’t there. I found out a couple days later that she was on hospice. I went to her room for a visit. It was definitely a room with a view. It looked out over Cascade Lake. The sun was shining.

As Phyllis and I talked, she occasionally looked out to the lake. There were bikers and walkers and plenty of dogs. As I listened to the stories of Phyllis' life, the time in Howard Lake and the cabin on Lake Ida, she seemed to be remembering days gone by. I got the sense that there were lots of good days, lots of love in the family, lots of weekends at the cabin, and maybe a favorite book or two to read to the children and grandchildren.

While Phyllis laid in bed, I asked if she thought this past year had been hard for the schools. She readily agreed. And then I asked if she thought it was harder for the students or their teachers. And she replied, "Both." Students were having a hard time keeping up. Teachers were having to work so hard to help them. She felt badly for both. Maybe once a teacher, always a teacher.

Eventually, we shared communion. As we did, we said prayers for the students and teachers, and especially for the kindergarten teachers.

Phyllis Ostlund Olson had the gift of teaching. It was a gift from God. She expanded children's worlds and helped them to imagine things they might never have known or imagined on their own.

As I was getting ready to leave, I shared this with Phyllis: "What amazes me about so many of our teachers is that we remember their names. Months, years, decades later we still remember the names of our teachers. Phyllis, do you think many of your students remember your name?" Just then she turned toward Cascade Lake. She had a look of humility in her eyes, and peace in her heart, and the slightest smile on her face. She was a teacher. Her students remembered her. And she made the world a better place.

Sadly, we say goodbye to Phyllis this day – wife, mother, mother-in-law, grandmother, great-grandmother, teacher, and friend. We're going to miss her. We trust that Christ, the Great Teacher, has prepared a place for her, and he is holding her in the palm of his hand.

Pastor Vern Christopherson
May 19, 2021