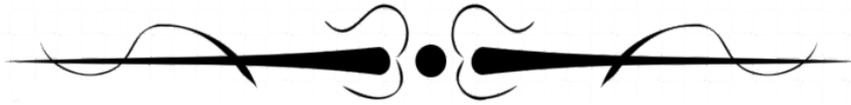
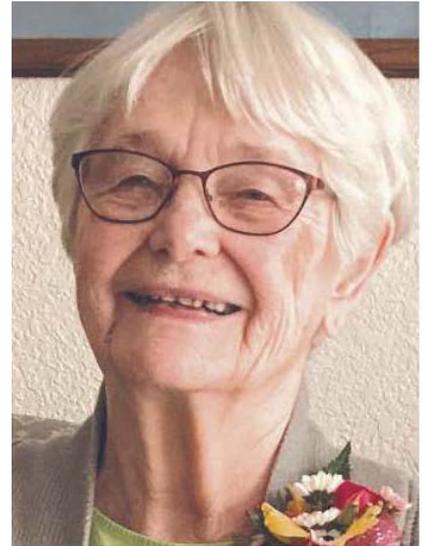


Verlain A. Duncan



April 15, 1928 - August 20, 2021

Barb, Richard, Gary, Doug, Randy, Tim, 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.



Verlaine Alice Duncan was born and raised on a farm in the Nearstrand area, not far from Kenyon. She was the first of six children. Like a lot of farm kids, especially those raised in the church, she regularly heard about and experienced the steadfast love of the Lord. She witnessed it season after season in the fields. The crops were planted and harvested. God provided. You could probably say that from early on, Verlaine rarely set her sights too high. Rather, she learned contentedness and gratefulness for the things that came her way.

After graduating from Kenyon High School, Verlaine moved to Cannon Falls and got a job as a telephone operator. This was back in the days of party-line telephones. People were supposed to keep their calls to 3 minutes. Considering some of the people we know, I'm pretty sure that didn't always happen. And there were occasional rubberneckers who listened in on other people's conversations. And from time to time, emergencies came up. Through it all, telephone operators had an important role to play in human communication, and in helping people manage their lives.

Paul's letter to the Galatians talks about the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Some say that Verlaine had all of these fruits, and she probably did. And I have a hunch that many of them were rooted in her work as a telephone operator on a party-line system.

While working in Cannon Falls, Verlaine rented a room from a couple in town. The couple just happened to have a son named Rodney. Let's just say, it wasn't exactly love at first sight. Verlaine already had a boyfriend. But one day she spotted Rodney up on a second-story ladder building a house. As the story goes, Verlaine took a long look, and then later announced, "That's the man I'm going to marry!"

Love has a surprising way of taking hold of our hearts, doesn't it? Winter passes and spring arrives. The poetry of the Song of Solomon says: "My beloved speaks and says to me, 'Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away, for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.'"

Now, I'm not sure if a certain farm girl from Nerstrand was ready to burst into song, but I'd like to believe it's possible. Over the years the poetry of the Song of Solomon has often been interpreted allegorically - everything from the love of God for mother earth, to the love for Christ for the church, to the coming of springtime, flowers and birds. Take this

poetry more literally, though, and you might actually hear it as the beginnings of a love song between a young telephone operator and a carpenter up on a two-story ladder. Indeed, *the flowers appear on the earth, the time of singing has come.*”

Rodney and Verlaine got married. A house was built on a stretch of land along the Cannon River. The water flowed. The birds sang. Verlaine planted purple irises along the banks. Before long, children came along – *the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases* – Barbara and Richard were born, then Gary and Doug. Verlaine was delighted to give up her job as a telephone operator and become a full-time mother and homemaker. She was hard-working, gentle, and loving. She wasn’t a pushover, though. She had an inner strength and didn’t hesitate to use a flyswatter if the kids needed some coaxing.

Much like Verlaine’s childhood, the children grew up going to church – First English Lutheran in Cannon Falls. The family didn’t have a lot of extra money, but they gave thanks for what they had. There was always food on the table. Chipped beef on toast was a typical dinner. Hot milk on rusks was another. Barb remembers wanting to go to prom, but there wasn’t money to buy a dress. So, Verlaine cut up one of her dresses – a Kelly green dress with long sleeves – and she transformed it into a sleeveless jumper.

Time passed. Rodney eventually built a second house – one on Lake Byllesby. I’m guessing the family needed more room. That meant there were more flowers for Verlaine to plant, more birds for her to hear sing, and two more children to welcome into the world: Randy and Tim. Verlaine continued her homemaking. Money might have been tight, but life in the Duncan household was rich and full. *More steadfast love. Great is God’s faithfulness.*

As the seasons passed, Rodney got offered a job in Faribault at the Minnesota School for the Deaf. The family was uprooted. The children were growing up, continuing their schooling, and eventually starting families of their own. One constant was Verlaine as “Mom.” She never tired of that role. She lovingly embraced it.

Rodney eventually retired from his job in Faribault. He and Verlaine split their time between RV camping in Arizona and cabin life on Grace Lake near Bemidji. As the family grew, the cabin became their gathering place. It still is to this day.

Verlaine’s lifelong interest in flowers, birds, and nature never waned. *Winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come.* In July, the family gathered again at the cabin. Verlaine walked the grounds over and over. Yet she seemed more tired than before, more reflective. In hindsight, it was as if she were saying goodbye to the flowers that she and her mother had planted over the years. In the words of Verlaine’s favorite hymn: “I come to the garden alone, while the dew is still on the roses, and the voice I hear falling on my ear, the Son of God discloses.”

There were not only flowers to which to say goodbye; there were the birds as well. The hymn continues: “He speaks and the sound of his voice is so sweet the birds hush their singing, and the melody that he gave to me, within my heart is ringing.”

The family retreat at Grace Lake came to an end. There had been plenty of laughter, good food, and celebration. But it seemed to some that spirited, vital Verlaine was losing energy. An EKG was scheduled, and then a second. The change was dramatic. Doctors suggested a pacemaker. Verlaine was in favor of it. Alas, the surgery did not go well. It took longer than expected. There was bleeding. Verlaine did not have much fight left in her.

We come to the end of our hymn: “I’d stay in the garden with Him, though the night around me is falling, but He bids me go; through the voice of woe, His voice to me is calling.”

Verlaine died on Friday, August 20 at St. Mary’s Hospital. That makes us sad. We had walked with this farm girl from Nerstrand for many years. We had experienced the steadfast love of the Lord in her and through her. And if we listened closely, we might even have seen the flowers she noticed, and heard the birds she valued. The fact of the matter is, though, when the end comes, life never seems quite long enough. We always wish for just a little more.

In First Thessalonians, Paul does his best to reassure us: “We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.” In fact, Paul says, we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and in some mysterious sense, we will join in his death and resurrection.

This is a day, then, not just for sadness, but for a glimmer of hope. *The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning. Great is God’s faithfulness.*

We claim this promise for Verlaine and Rodney, that they are living in God’s eternal life this day. And maybe that life is a little like a garden, with flowers and birds and a love song which never ends. Amen

Pastor Vern Christopherson
August 31, 2021