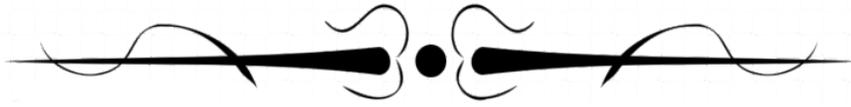
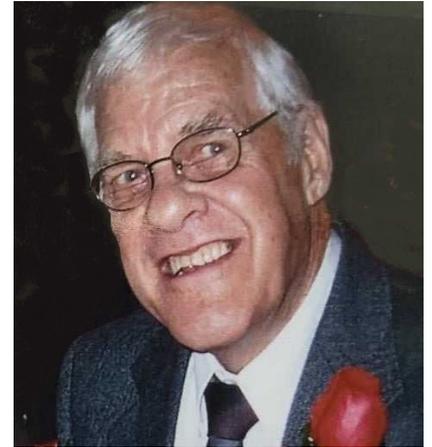


Donald I. Christensen



July 20, 1927 - September 14, 2021

Virginia, Ann, Marie, Jon, Sara, 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.



In his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul 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’ve seen many of these gifts in one person – Don Christensen. A teacher? Yes. An exhorter? Yes. A giver? Yes. A leader? Yes. But if I had to pick one that stands out most, it would be: “the compassionate, in cheerfulness.” Whether Don was calling people by name on the way to coffee shop in Milaca, or figuring out how to help a young family get started with a cow or two, or making sure that Fairview hospitals kept operating in their little corner of northwestern Minnesota, compassion – *feeling with* people – was a big part of Don’s life. He had it right up to the end.

We witnessed Don’s compassion far and wide, but especially in the way he related to his family. It was one of the ways Don helped the folks around him respond in positive ways to challenging situations. This started early for Don. His brothers went off to war. Don stayed home, set aside any dreams of college, and tended to his mom and dad. You could call Don an incurable optimist. I think it had little to do with the breaks that came his way. Just the opposite. So often the breaks didn’t come Don’s way, but he was determined to make something good come out of whatever situation he and others were in. His actions remind me of Paul’s words in Romans 8: “We know that God can work anything for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” That purpose was at the center of most everything Don did.

Storytelling was a big part of how Don showed his compassion. He met the love of his life, Virginia, at Luther League at Zion Lutheran in Milaca. Virginia had a musical side, piano and voice. She quickly caught Don’s attention. From early on, Don considered Virginia his best friend. A wedding was just around the corner.

Don enjoyed telling stories of Virginia growing up in south Minneapolis. She was a city girl, refined, and had a white winter coat. She rarely came close to the barn with that coat – there were cows in there! Then again, when it came time for her to deliver her first child, Don was in the barn and Virginia had to let him know. The baby was coming. As Don told it, he was milking the cows and he had to find someone who could finish the milking. A neighbor stepped in. *Hold on, Virginia, hold on!*

Quick as could be, they jumped into the Harvester truck and took off for town. Don was speeding. He got pulled over by the police. When Don explained Virginia's pressing need, he didn't get a ticket. Rather, he got an escort all the way to the hospital. Their first child, Ann, was born.

Don, ever the one to keep track of details, had to finish the story. He said that back in those days, young mothers usually stayed in the hospital for a week. It cost \$8 a night for Virginia and \$2 a night for the baby. If you're interested in the total, do the math. As you do, think of Don, because that's exactly what he would have done.

Don's compassion, and his cheerfulness, certainly stood out in his parenting. I asked each of the children to share a story of a particular moment that exemplified their father's spirit. Ann told the story of a nearby farm family. There were a number of kids in the family. Money was tight. Christmas was coming. One of the young children caught Don's attention. Don couldn't bear the thought of a little boy not having something for Christmas morning. So Don headed home and found an old blue bike in the back of a shed. He put his children to work in fixing it up. They scrubbed it clean, got it in good working order, and put a shiny red bow on the handlebar. Soon they delivered a well-loved blue bike for a bit of Christmas cheer to a family in need. That was Don. In compassion, cheerfulness.

Marie remembers having a less-than-stellar record with curfew. One evening, she got home well past midnight. Her dad might have been kindhearted, but he wasn't a pushover. Marie had some explaining to do. From what I've been told, the other children could hear everything. They put pillows over their heads because Marie was getting a well-deserved tongue lashing. According to Marie, despite her father's displeasure, he never let his children go to bed without a kiss on the cheek and a whispered, "I love you." And usually he included the prayer: "Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep."

The family was expanding. A boy came along - Jon. Jon remembers his dream of serving in the Navy like Uncle Cal. That dream would include education and training at the Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. Jon was in the spring semester of his senior year in high school. His registration was set. He had recommendation letters from the likes of Walter Mondale and Hubert Humphrey. But unfortunately, there were strict quotas in those days. Jon didn't get accepted into Annapolis. Now what?

Dad, ever the compassionate one, was always ready to make the best out of a tough situation. He offered Jon a couple of options: 1) he could stay home, milk cows, and they could add on to the barn; or 2) he could start a band - rock band. According to Jon, he tried milking cows - by hand - and quickly changed his mind. So, his dad set up him and some buddies in an old chicken coop. They cleaned up the joint, poured fresh concrete, tacked egg cartons on the walls to muffle the sound, and a band was born. They called themselves "B-Flat." And would you believe that in the middle of the summer, Jon heard from the Nav. He got an ROTC scholarship to go to a college of his choice. He chose the University of Minnesota.

Don and Virginia were not done. Last but not least came Sara. Sara remembers a time when she was 16. She and a friend had gone to a movie in St. Cloud. It was winter. The roads were slick. They got into a serious car accident on the way home. The police had to be called. The car was badly damaged. Even more damaged, perhaps, was the girls' sense of safety and security.

The very next morning, Sara was scheduled to play the organ for worship at Emanuel Lutheran Church in nearby Bock, Minnesota. She didn't want to drive herself. Of course, dad could have given her a ride. But instead of simply doing that, he spent a fair amount of time talking Sara through what had happened the night before. He encouraged her to get back behind the wheel and drive herself. And eventually that's what Sara did. Look back, Sara never forgot that talk. And she was profoundly grateful for her dad's compassionate, encouraging spirit.

We could go on and on with stories about Don. The only trouble is, we don't have Don with us to help fill in the gaps. You get the idea, though: "We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us...the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness."

Don had a big heart. It was filled with compassion. He spent a lifetime *feeling with* people. Grandson Matt made the comment: "How ironic that a man with such a big heart might die of heart failure." In the spirit of Don, though, perhaps we could see it in a slightly more positive light. Perhaps Don's heart didn't fail. Maybe he simply had finished the work he'd been given to do. And maybe he knew he was leaving behind a big family - children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren - who were more than capable of continuing his work. You know, like that blue bike for the boy at Christmastime. Think of it: Don's whole family *compassionate, in cheerfulness!*

Poet Maya Angelou has a quote that sums up Don's life well: "I have learned that people will forget what you said, and people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

Indeed, whether for Don or Don's family, *God can work all things together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.* Amen.

Amen.

Pastor Vern Christopherson
September 17, 2021