

Honoring a Fellow Minister A Tribute to Ed Neiderhiser

Dear friends, dear family, dear community of Ed Neiderhiser

I never thought I would stand here someday to “remember” Ed in this way. I never thought that the name Ed Neiderhiser would show up in our parish records among the diseased of the year 2019. It is still, on so many levels, hard to believe. Just ten days before his heart attack, Ed stood here in this sanctuary, playing his trumpet with gusto. He was so excited about the Jazz Vespers coming to St. Peter’s. And afterwards he wrote me a wonderful note saying how well he thought it went and how important jazz in worship was for him. It was the last email I received from Ed.

I always loved to have him in our congregation, and I will miss him as a colleague and a person with deep knowledge of people in our community. There was mutual respect from the beginning. Ed was a wonderfully refreshing preacher and it was always a no-brainer to ask him to preach on a Sunday when I wasn’t here. The only problem was: if you didn’t ask him early enough, he was already booked somewhere else.

When I asked Ed to “do church” for me, I knew everybody would be in good hands, as Neiderhiser walked up and down the aisle, preaching with deep knowledge, intuition, quick wit, and an awareness for his listeners, making things up in the fly, like a good jazz preacher. But then again, he didn’t need to be in the spotlight all the time. He was equally comfortable sitting in the chair together with a bunch of musicians, as part of jazz splash or the ever-changing annual jazz ensembles, or Midnight Review or any other group put together ad-hoc. He was equally comfortable hanging art on our famous art wall work with Sally on a Friday morning, a job they held for a total of 30-plus years in this congregation. And when they informed me via letter, two months ago, to retire from this responsibility, I couldn’t ask them to re-consider. Because, you know, we have this unwritten rule for our volunteers: when you have done something for 30 years, you actually have a right to retire! It is still on so many levels hard to believe that Ed the preacher, Ed the musician, Ed the human North Wales landmark, Ed the guy from next door East Montgomery Ave, is no longer with us.

Then again, the two disciples in the gospel, who went out on that cathartic walk to Emmaus probably hadn’t fully expected what Jesus had told them repeatedly: that he would have the audacity to die. Jesus was only what, 33? And now, as they walked the road of depression, the road of grief, the road of confusion, the road of funeral arrangements, they shared with each other and with a stranger all the things that weighed on their hearts and minds, and there was no shortage of material. Strangely, it didn’t matter that a stranger had joined them. The things they talked about were so fundamentally human that it didn’t matter whether this fellow had known Jesus or not. It didn’t matter whether he was a local or a foreigner, a Jew or a Gentile. All that mattered was that he that he could relate and that he cared. This stranger seemed to know a thing or two about life and death. He encouraged them to take another look at the Scriptures, to see things they hadn’t noticed before, to consider anew the depth of God’s Word, he brought them closer to the heart of Jesus!

If Ed were to walk with us this morning, what would he say, what would he do? Would he perhaps open Scripture to us, to all of us, whether we are Christians or Muslims, Jews, or none's? Would he perhaps share with us some of his own wisdom? We all know he could talk... all the way up to Emmaus and back, he could talk! We know he could argue, from here to Lansdale and back. We know he could reason and play with scripture all day long. The kid that once sat in a tree at home in Erie, PA, reading book after book, he had things to say.

I came across this article from Steeple Views. It was written in 2005, in the wake of the Terri Schiavo case, right around Easter it was. The author was a certain Rev. Edward A. Neiderhiser. He expressed bewilderment about the fact that, in his words, "the focus of so much attention has been drawn to the desperate and emotional crusade to preserve life at all costs." And then he concluded, "The message of Easter observance is that human righteousness is not to be found in clinging to the brokenness of old life, but in trusting fully in the gracious promise of new life." How did I find this message? Don't worry, I wasn't going through all the old Steeple Views issues to somehow find something that Ed wrote. No, one of his former students sent it to me, Kim Dunn. She sent me an email saying how hard it is for her to come to terms with his sudden death. And she said she found this and it brought great comfort to her. "Easter is not about clinging to the brokenness of old life, but trusting fully in the gracious promise of new life." Ed wrote this, and I am sure he preached this, and every once in a while, you know, we ought to take a preacher by his words.

I am reading this today and I hear it like the two disciples heard words of wisdom on their way to Emmaus before their eyes were finally opened and they recognized that this stranger making sense of Jesus' death was in fact Jesus himself. In a similar way, this voice from 2005 making sense of the final questions of life and death is in fact the person we will bring to the cemetery today. In his own words, the risen Christ has been revealed to us. As hard as it may be, let us follow Ed's own advice and not cling to what could have been, or what we think should have been, but accept the promise of new life that is no less true today than when he was with us, preaching, playing, talking.

On that awful day, April 17, in the middle of Holy Week, after I received that phone call and rushed to the hospital, I found Ed's body stretched on a bed in the Emergency Room surrounded by Sally and Jason, and he actually did have a smile on his face, a typical Ed smile. And I thought, "How appropriate!" I truly believe that death never scared him. He lived life and lived it without the fear of having to prove something. He had a great sense of humor and was always game for a good joke. In fact, his ministry career was sort of funny when you think about it. I mean, here is a guy who is as smart as anyone in this room, who obtains a PHD in the Hebrew Scriptures from a Jewish College, who is an accomplished musician, both book-smart and people-savvy, and he goes to his bishop and the bishop says, "Well, I don't have anything really for you right now." And then some people step up and they have some ideas and this smart kid from Western PA becomes a full time part-time minister, splitting time between St. Peter's (he served as Associate Pastor here from 1985 until 2003) and King's Way, a struggling church in urban Philadelphia. At around the same time he gets involved with the Jazz Vespers movement

coming out of Old Pine Street Church in Philadelphia. And when King's Way closes a few years later and he goes to his bishop again, the bishop says, "Funny, I really don't have anything for you right now." "Except, there is this prison gig, but you are probably not interested in that." That's how Ed's career at Graterford Prison began, and what a blessing he has been to that place! I can't think of a person more suited for that congregation than Ed was with his smarts and his humor and level headedness and most of all, his creativity and sense of fairness. He was the head of the chaplaincy program there from 1992 until 2016 when he retired. One of the funniest stories that he ever told about Graterford is the day when he was invited to target shooting training. He had never had a gun in his hands in his entire life before he took his first aim. And then, as this true story goes, he outshot all the guards. I don't know whether this says more about Ed's natural steady hand or about the skills of our prison guards, but let's not speculate here.

One of the other funny stories is how he met his wife Sally Kavash. The two of them, this is no joke, were in charge of the single's ministry at St. Peter's. They did that so successfully that they started singling each other out, spending an awful lot of time together. And then Herb and Molly, Sally's parents, invited this young minister to dinner at Kavash Central on Summit Ave all the time, and Herb would say, "Look, Sally cooked dinner for us." It was the most blatant white lie between here and the Mississippi River. Molly had cooked the dinners, but those two got married on November 22, 1985 and spent wonderful years together. Herb: job accomplished!

It is still hard to believe what happened. Ed retired just three years ago. He loved his new life, which was in some ways not all that different. He loved being a wandering supply preacher, walking the aisles of churches all across the synod. He loved being involved in the various music groups, he loved breathing life through his trumpet. He started the Thursday nights at the Green Fork. He did what he always wanted to do: preaching and playing, playing and preaching and living out his calling in life. He did that up to his last breath. He was truly a blessed man, a happy man. Didn't Jesus say, "Blessed are those who play a musical instrument, for they shall be part of God's band?"

As we are gathered here this morning, looking at the life of a dear friend, we have much to be grateful for. From the early beginnings in the steel town of Jeanette, PA, to his school years in Erie, to his college years at Thiel and his seminary days in Gettysburg, there was always huge promise in his life. And while he never succumbed to the temptation to follow the path convention, he fulfilled this promise in his own way, in the way the Spirit led him. And therefore dear friends, we don't despair, but we take him by his own word that none of us needs to cling to our lives, none of us can determine our life span anyway, but here and today we can live life to the fullest and live in the hope of the resurrection, in the confidence that we are in God's hands in this life and beyond. That's how Ed lived, trust me on that. Up there, I am sure Ed will find a band or two to join and if you pay close attention, you may, every once in a while, hear one of his tunes coming down from above, comforting you, letting you know that he is still with us, still playing, hidden in Christ, risen with Christ.

Amen.

