Remembering St Janelle

July, 2016

Sometimes life feels full of whiners and complainers. And there’s often good reason for their whining and complaints. We are born to trouble, as the saying goes, as the sparks fly upward. But living in an age of wonders, in a world with so much natural and manmade bounty, I ponder whether we have a right to complain so much. Someone once said that language evolved to allow us to gossip and complain, and it wouldn’t surprise me. I certainly hear the grievances spilling out of my own desperate heart.

I remember first meeting Janelle. I was arranging housing for visitors who were coming for our annual Sacred Harp singing in Kalamazoo, and I had her stay with my daughter, Liz, who was in her first apartment on her own. Amazingly, both Janelle and my daughter had cats who looked, and, I think, had the same mannerisms, like parted identical twins. And so I first thought of her as this pleasant person who liked cats (it should be noted that I don’t especially like cats).

But over the years since I first met Janelle, I began to learn more of her story, in particular, the breast cancer she “fought like a girl.” It surprised me; I had no idea. There were depths here I didn’t know. And I watched as she deliberately set out to journey with her mother as she declined. And I learned how many deep friendships she had formed. And, though I, of course, knew she was a singer, how much music meant to her. She described herself as “independent, strong, sensitive, and emotional” and “a child of God, imperfect, but loved and forgiven.”

Having spent that time with her mother, and having gone through a season of attending the singings she loved so much (and how much did she know that this was going to be her last chance on earth to do this?), she returned to her work. And life seemed back to normal, I think, except for this sinus infection. But as we know, the sinus infection was more than just an infection; cancer had spread, and the prognosis was, well, we know what the prognosis was.

So Janelle started to put her affairs in order. Everyone I know marvels at the calm serenity with which she faced her upcoming death. She arranged for the care of her beloved cat, Taz. She found the people she needed to support her as death approached. She sang when she could.

How delighted we were that she was well enough to join us at the Mid-Michigan Singing near Lansing. She knew, and we knew, and we knew that she knew, and she knew that we knew, what was coming. She led one of her favorite tunes, *Consecration*:

There then to Thee Thine own I leave,

Mold as Thou wilt my passive clay;

But let me all Thy stamp receive,

But let me all Thy words obey.

Serve with a single heart and eye,

And to Thy glory live or die.

I think it’s fair to say that a person who faces death with the aplomb and courage that Janelle showed is a saint, a “holy one,” someone set apart, who serve with a single heart and eye. Saints are imperfect, as she well knew. But saints also show us the way of living. She was like a bubble on a sea of troubles; well-aware of her own fragility and faults, but aloft with the Spirit. She showed us, in her ordinariness, that we can be saints, too; saints whose hope is in the Lord; saints who know that, in the end, all is well and all is well and all will be well; saints who sing.

So thank you, St Janelle, for being your ordinary self, and how you would laugh to be called a saint! And thank you for showing our feet the way. May your God help us serve, as you did, with a single heart and eye, and to God’s glory live or die.