

Celebration of Grace in the Life of Michelle Lynn Stortz September 16, 2022 – Pastor Susan Langhauser

Grace and peace to you from God our Creator, and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

We have gathered here today to show our love and support for the family of our friend and loved one, Michelle, whose life was a veritable patchwork quilt of roles: daughter, sister, wife, mother, relative, teacher, co-worker, member of Advent, neighbor, friend. Michelle brightened up all our days until unexpectedly, and without warning, she left us much too soon. We were not ready to say goodbye. We are not ready to be without her. We are not ready to accept the fact of her absence in our lives, and yet we must, for she has gone. But whatever you are feeling today in the wake of Michelle's passing, whatever questions may be in your mind or in your heart, you can be absolutely sure of one thing: that Michelle is now, as she has always been, in the loving arms of a loving God.

Michelle was a seeker of knowledge...as we have heard, she wanted to understand things and invested herself in her students and everyone around her so that she could better connect and lift us up. But there is no understanding for her unexpected departure from our midst. There is no "why." There is no suitable response to the things of this world, except for the answers we find for ourselves outside of this world. Which leaves us, not with understanding, but only with faith.

Noted author Rabbi Harold Kushner describes God with one word: Comfort. *God is comfort*. And this is the word to which we cling in difficult days like these. Because what we all are always looking for was already present for Michelle – for God had found her over and over again -- before she was born, as she was "knit together in his mother's womb," when she was claimed as a beloved child of God in the waters of baptism, when she confirmed her faith and every time she was nourished by Word and Sacrament.

Obviously, she was loved. Oh, how she was loved (and how she loved us with treats and smiles and encouragement and laughter.) She taught us the art of collaboration, witnessed by the way Principal Oborny wove together the remembrances of some of her RP family. In the same manner, her children, Chandler, Paige and Aly shared their "Top Ten" best parts of their mom. Since this was the #1 at the top of their list, I guess we can validate the statement that Game Nights were legendary in the Stortz household. #2: she loved live music, acoustic music and would go with dad, family, friends whenever possible. #3: gifts and cards were always thoughtful and intentional when it came from her. #4: she was always on the phone and always checking on friends and relatives through *long* talks with Vi, Kim, Dawn etc... #5: she let us come to her classroom after school and see firsthand her extreme patience and genuine kindness. #6: she always had a smile and a positive attitude towards things even if we didn't or couldn't. Our biggest cheerleader. #7: she remembered everything about our lives. What our friends were up to, things we were looking forward to. #8: she always checked in and genuinely cared about people who were important to us. #9: she and dad were just the best role models and unstoppable as a team. #10: you could talk to her about anything at any time.

Some years ago, I heard a sermon that has stuck with me about Jesus raising the son of the widow of Nain. In that story, Jesus comes upon a funeral procession, and calls the child back to life. I have been thinking about that sermon a lot lately, summed up in three comforting points: Jesus stopped the procession of death, spoke a word of grace, and called forth new life. It is inevitable, where God is present, that death will bring forth new life. For those of us who grieve deeply today, life will not return to normal. We will have to find another way of life. And that is just what is already happening among you and in this gathering. We are here to begin

doing the same work that Our Lord performed: we are stopping the procession of death, we are speaking a word of grace into it and we are calling forth new life. And God will use each and every one of you to accomplish that work.

As I sat at Michelle's home with her family, and finished decision-making about the arrangements, the stories of Michelle and her love began to bubble up into the conversation. Someone smiled, someone else snickered, then a small remembrance, and the tension gave way to warm laughter. Sounds as if that's been happening all around because that's who Michelle was and still is among you. So if someone asks, "what's going on in here?" Our answer might be, "New Life, *that's* what's going on in here." As Michelle would say, "And you can check that off your list..."

I'll like to conclude with a beautiful prayer, a meditation for those who mourn:

When I die, give what's left of me away
to children and old men that wait to die.
And if you need to cry,
cry for your brother walking the streets beside you.
And when you need me, put your arms around anyone
and give them what you need to give me.
I want to leave you something,
something better than words or sounds.
Look for me in the people I've known or loved,
and if you cannot give me away,
at least let me live in your eyes and not in your mind.
You can love me best by letting hands touch hands,
and by letting go of children that need to be free.
Love doesn't die, people do.
So, when all that's left of me is love,
give me away.*

Thank you for the privilege of honoring Michelle today. May your grief be dimmed in the promise of Resurrection, and of the great Reunion in our heavenly home. "The Light shines in the darkness. And the darkness has not overcome it." Amen.

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**Kaddish Yatom – Mourner's Kaddish (Meditations before Kaddish)*