

“SAINTS I HAVE KNOWN”
Matthew 5:1-12; Revelation 7:9-17
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North Hill Christian Church in Spokane, WA was the church of my childhood and youth. It was the place where my faith was formed and where I first began to hear a call to ministry. The people of that congregation shaped and influenced me in immeasurable ways. There were – and still are – many saints there.

One of them was Marge Bogue. Marge Bogue was the church secretary at North Hill. I still remember when she retired after working nearly 30 years in the church office. There was a huge retirement party for her that included words from every pastor with whom she had worked. Marge had chronic hip problems, so I don't really remember a time when she didn't walk with a cane. However, the cane never seemed to slow her down. She was a fixture in that congregation and in the office. Marge was the unofficial historian of the congregation because everything that happened passed by her desk – and she seemingly could remember it all. What was the format of Laity Sunday five years ago? Who taught 3rd and 4th grade four years ago? Who took the dreaded 3 a.m. slot in the vigil? Marge knew it all, and like one of those paid greeters at the mall Marge was in the office ready to help with whatever needed to be done. One of the enduring memories I have of Marge is from a summer afternoon when I rode my bike to the church to help stuff and deliver envelopes for some church mailing. I wasn't old enough to drive, so I suspect I was about 14. After Marge had set me up with the supplies for folding and stuffing, she sat down beside me, began to help, and talked to me. And it wasn't some patronizing talk to a 14 year old: it was a genuine conversation, filled with legitimate questions about what I thought about this topic and what that idea meant to me. I was there helping out with what felt like a mundane task, and yet never had I felt so included in the life of the church. It was an unofficial ministry, not in any job description or welcome packet, but the ministry of conversation and welcome at North Hill that began with Marge.

A few years later when, for some crazy reason, they asked me to chair the Worship Committee as a senior in high school, Marge was one of the members on that committee. I remember the first meeting: looking around at a group of people who were two, three, or four times my age, trying to figure out why I was leading this group that obviously had more experience than I. After that first meeting, Marge offered to help with anything that needed to be done. And she thanked me for leading the committee. She never seemed to doubt that I was the committee chair or that I could handle it. I was glad someone thought so.

At Marge's retirement party, she let folks know that she would be around the church but that she would take a reduced role because she and her husband, Ezra, wanted to do some traveling. And so she set about taking on her reduced role. And in doing so, Marge spent time as a Trustee, served as the first woman elder (akin to a Deacon here) – after a pretty nasty church fight over who could be an elder – and generally moved from leading the church office to leading it from various leadership positions. Marge understood what the ministry of hospitality was all about; she was dedicated to the

church and was just an incredibly rounded person who was able to do – and did – many things. She is undoubtedly one of the saints of that church; and as I spoke with people over the last week, thinking about the saints I knew from North Hill, every thought started with Marge. She was never particularly bold or daring, never particularly outspoken on any one thing; she was just always there and willing to jump in, and many of us learned a great deal from her.

Another saint I met at North Hill was Gary Kight. Gary was in the youth group when I was a small child. My parents were lay leaders for that youth group, so I spent many days surrounded by high school youth. Gary was one of the people I remember, particularly from a youth group “Capture the Flag” game in which he made sure I was included. I was maybe five years old and, through no fault of his, Gary’s team was stuck with me while my parents helped run the youth retreat. I remember climbing through the blackberry bushes with Gary as we desperately tried to sneak in closer to that red flag.

Gary eventually married Sherry Davis, the daughter of our pastor, and they both became school teachers in Spokane. Gary was one of the leaders of the congregation: teaching the senior high Sunday school class, organizing church league softball and basketball teams, serving on fellowship committees as well as many boards. Gary taught computer skills and coached multiple sports at the high school I attended. While coaching girls basketball, he managed to survive a 2-18 losing season and win Coach of the Year the following year. He was dedicated to everything he did, including raising his two children, Jeremy and Stephanie.

Quite honestly, Gary isn’t your typical saint. He could be brash, egotistical, and a bit harsh. However, there was always a context for those behaviors. Most often, that context was the basketball court. During church league basketball, we often had practice on Sunday afternoon at Rogers High School – where I attended and Gary taught. Some of my memories of Gary are of the intensity of his practicing and work ethic. He coached basketball all week; and as we stepped out on the court, Gary took no prisoners. I remember working hard to drive around him only to have him poke the ball away and scream down the court the other way. It was early in the season, and my basketball shoes still looked shiny – perhaps more like a fashion statement than tools for the game. “Nice shoes,” he said on the next trip down the court. The next time I tried to work my way past him, I heard him mumble, “Come on ‘shoes’, try to drive.” For the next few weeks whenever I would step on the court with Gary, my name was “shoes.” This was his time to play, and his intensity and competitive drive left him more than a little bit gruff. Several times I saw Gary explode with frustration when officials made a bad call in a church game. He was different there than when he coached. I think he felt he could afford to have outbursts when he was playing but that he had to act in a different way when he had 15 high school students watching him. So there were times when the “on-the-court Gary” could be a bit of a hothead. “Come on shoes. . .game on!” I can still hear the echo. And then it was Monday morning, and we entered into class and the competitive sneer was gone. Now he was simply, “Mr. Kight,” and I was just another student. I remember Gary as a very good teacher. Rogers was a very challenging school to teach in, with a high drop out rate, a huge teen pregnancy problem, racial issues bubbling to the surface; yet Gary loved to teach and treated every student as an equal as each entered his class.

Clearly, I don't define Gary as a saint because of his on-the-court demeanor. However, athletics was a huge part of his life; and it was his mode of evangelism and, quite frankly, his life. At North Hill we had three softball teams, two basketball teams, a volleyball team, and three teams of bowlers. Gary was involved in all of them, although he merely subbed on the bowling team. However, many people came to join North Hill because Gary brought them into the church via the games we played. I can't tell you how many people ended up as members because of their experience on one of the teams. When there was a new visitor, Gary was one of the people who sought them out and asked which sport they played and where they might fit into the life of the church. Gary was involved in other aspects of the life of the church, too; he didn't get out of the committee work just because of the games. But his most compelling ministry was on the field and court – bringing people into the community as we chased the bouncing ball.

One of the moments that most defined Gary's role in our church was in the midst of one of the church debates. Gary stood in the gap between the sides during one of several church fights that happened at North Hill in my growing up years. In the midst of a contentious debate, Gary made his way to the "for" microphone and said something about being "for" community. He said that the way the meeting was going he felt very alone and that we needed some time for prayer. And then he asked that we all bow for prayer while he led us in silent and spoken prayer; and the tone of the meeting changed. North Hill still hasn't learned to disagree very well, but I know that my understanding of being "for" something in the church changed when Gary took to the microphone that day.

Just prior to my moving to Seattle in 1993, Gary was diagnosed with leukemia. I remember visiting him in the hospital and realizing how broken his body was as he went through treatment and hoped for a reprieve from the disease that was overtaking his body. It was strange seeing him lying in that bed rather than harassing me on the court. I remember not knowing what to say to him. I wanted to say something of more depth than "get well," but that was really all I could say. Gary eventually went into remission for several years, but I saw him again in the hospital in Seattle when his remission ended and the disease was once again ravaging his body. The last time I saw Gary was about a week before he died as I sat in that hospital room with Sherry, Jeremy, and Stephanie. His death was close, and I talked with them about their husband and father. I told them about "Capture the Flag," about the basketball court battles, and about his skill as a teacher. Today I remember Gary Kight, the saint who could burn with intensity and teach: he was a combination of ego and tenderness; he could teach and he could harangue; he was a father, coach, husband, and evangelist . . . on the court and off.

Today I remember Marge and Gary – both of them saints.