

**“SAINTS I HAVE KNOWN”**  
**Isaiah 25:6-9; Matthew 5:1-12**  
**November 1, 2009**  
**The Rev. Elizabeth Oettinger**

Wally Niss was a member of my church in Duluth. He died a week ago Friday. In his first career, Wally was a senior partner in a big deal accounting firm in Minneapolis. Then one icy night, a logging truck lost its brakes as it was coming down a hill and plowed into the back of Wally’s small Datsun. It took the paramedics a couple of hours to cut Wally out of the accorded wreck of his car. A year and a half of rehab followed. Wally was able to walk again—a minor miracle—and do most things, but the neurological damage left him unable to return to his previous profession. He and his wife Hazel bought a seasonal resort on a lake in central Minnesota, and in the long off-season, Wally amused himself with woodworking projects. He would go to antique shops, yard sales, estate sales, and find country antiques in sad shape, and then carefully, lovingly, mend and refinish them. He also started building his own custom furniture. Within five years, this cottage industry had taken off. Wally and his wife Hazel moved to the big city of Duluth, and I had the privilege to get to know them well.

Wally prided himself on being a crusty old guy, the self-proclaimed cheapest son of a gun (ok, that’s not the word he used, but I don’t say his word in church. I’ll leave it to your imagination)—the cheapest “bleep” in the Northland. The proof of this statement occurred every Christmas Eve, when the Nisses would get their Christmas tree. It turned out that their next-door neighbors always left Christmas Eve morning to visit family in Wisconsin. They meticulously undecorated their tree before they left and parked it curbside for garbage pick-up. A few hours later, off they went in their car, Wally waving goodbye from next door. No sooner would they turn the corner, but Wally closed the distance, picking up their abandoned tree and setting it up in his living room.

Wally and Hazel had three sons, one, Ben, born with problems we would now define as placing him on the autism spectrum. Fortunately, Minnesota had then good social services, and from his young adulthood Ben lived more or less independently in a group home near his parents. When Wally started his woodworking business, part of his thinking was that this would be a good business for Ben. And sure enough, it was true. Ben didn’t have to meet the public. He loved the structure and repetitive art of woodworking. Three years ago, when Hazel died, Wally began to introduce a new woman, Linda, into the business. Ben had time to get used to her. She does sales and finance, and Ben can continue his woodworking career well inside his comfort zone, a now 60-year-old man who would otherwise be unemployable.

To me, Wally is one of the ordinary heroes of the world, one of the many saints who took what life gave him—not always the best of fortune—and adapted and adjusted and gave and taught, and laughed, and yes, continued his parsimonious Christmas tree tradition even up to last year. So I light this candle for Wally. May we find the courage and faith to meet the challenges of our lives with his amazing grace.

My second saint for this morning is John Vannorsdall, who succeeded William Sloane Coffin as chaplain of Yale in 1977. You could not imagine two more different men, except that in their own ways, both were brilliant preachers. If I have an early preaching mentor, it is John, who managed to preach an elegant and

compelling theology in words and images accessible to anyone. Case in point: John and his wife Pat had a small farm in Orange, Massachusetts to which they returned every summer; John would do supply preaching there for the local small-town Lutheran pastors. He would recycle the same sermons he preached at Battell Chapel at Yale, and they worked just as well for small-town farmers as for a congregation full of Ph.D.s.

When I was on sabbatical four years ago in Boston, the Vannorsdalls, now in their late 80s, invited me to spend Easter with them on the farm. The previous week, I had preached my first sermon in my preaching class, a Palm Sunday sermon I slaved over. I had so much face to lose with all those preaching students. I really worked and worked this sermon, considered it one of my best sermons ever. While I was visiting John and Pat, John showed me the sermon he had, in fact, preached the previous Sunday. Eighty-seven years old, and he had lost nothing. His sermon left my best work in the dust, miles behind him. What a gift. What a celebration to be privileged to know a preacher so inspiring!

But my favorite John story is a personal one. When Chick and I were first married, and I was a divinity student, we had little money. One day Chick went out and bought a new pair of shoes for \$40—just like that. In his defense, it was winter, and he had been filling the hole in the bottom of his one pair of work shoes with cardboard for weeks. But it was a financial crisis for us. And for me it was an emotional crisis. Why didn't he consult me? What did this mean? Could this marriage be saved? And I went to John, and cried all over his office, and when I was done, he calmly went to his desk and wrote me a check for \$100. "Here, he said," "take Chick out to dinner tonight, and this will get you through the rest of the month." In those days, our entire income after rent was \$123 dollars. "I don't know when I'll ever be able to pay this back," I wailed to John. "I don't want it back," he told me. Someday you will be in a position where \$100 will mean little to your finances and a lot to someone else. That's how you can repay me. And over years, I have given away John's \$100 over and over again. I light this second candle for my friend John, one of the great preachers of his generation, and the man who taught me my first significant lesson about giving and faith, what we now would call "paying it forward."

Thanks be to God for Wally and for John and for all the saints. Amen.