

Marion Virginia Milwee Kingdon

Funeral Homily¹
Christoph Keller, III

*Let us review
Lesson eleven
Paragraph Two
Axiom Seven*

*Once one dismisses
The rest of all possible worlds
One finds that this is
The best of all possible worlds*

But Professor! Candide raises an objection:

What about snakes?

Professor Pangloss:

*Snakes!
Twas snake that tempted Mother Eve
Because of snake we now believe
That though depraved
We can be saved . . .*

What about war?

*Though war may seem a bloody curse
It is a blessing in reverse
When canon roar
Both rich and poor
By danger are united!
Till every wrong is righted.*

And so on: Voltaire, set to music.

One of my better teachers wrote a book with the backwards title: *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief*. It teaches Christian doctrine as a process of discovering what we do *not* believe.

¹ St. Paul's Charlottesville, Dec. 4, 2008; St. Margaret's Little Rock, Dec. 13, 2008.

Some things are easier to disbelieve than others. It is easy today *not* to believe *Candide's* Professor Pangloss's proposition:

*For everything under the sun
There is a reason.*

And that this is “the best of all possible worlds.”

Not believing that is so easy we don't even have to come to church to disbelieve it anymore. The thinking public dropped that philosophy more or less in 1859, when it first read the *Origin of Species*.

Other disbeliefs are sometimes hard to swallow. Today I have in mind Lady Macbeth's famous proposition:

Life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

That proposition tempts us, maybe. It requires a kind of courage to reject it, a courage born of faith, and hope, and love.

Marion . . . Virginia . . . Milwee . . . Kingdon. Born February 19, 1968, first child of Marie Keese Milwee of Clarksdale, Miss...ippi, and every good thing *that* place represents; and the late Rev. Richard Franklin Milwee—the legend—and my best friend.

We're not here for me to tell you Richard Milwee stories but I have to tell you one. As a young seminarian, Marion's father was sent to a psychiatrist for the church's mandatory, pre-ordination, psychological evaluation. In those days, that meant Freud. Richard went in, sat down, and started answering the questions. In due course, the shrink said: “Now tell me about your sexual experience.” Richard thought on that a moment, and then he said: “I'll pass on that one. I'm not telling you about my sexual experience.” *Shrink*: “Why not?” *Richard*: “Because I haven't had enough of it to satisfy a Freudian psychologist, and I've had too much to suit the church.”

Marion was a southern beauty, but she was not a southern belle. She was independent, candid, sharp-witted, occasionally sharp-tongued. I've had trouble deciding whether “hot-tempered” also belongs on that list. I never saw her temper, except maybe just a momentary flash. But that may only be because I never gave her much more than a moment's reason to be mad.

She was fierce in one respect, I know. Marion was fierce in her resistance to the dying of the light. She was determined to live, a determination born of love. We would all want our wives and mothers to be that fierce for us.

Marion grew up in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, an Old South town, in the days when Old South towns were giving way to something else. She moved to Little Rock and our famous Central High School, where a new South, and maybe a new America, was trying to emerge. That is still a work in progress. She did her part to help it happen.

For a change of scenery and academic pace, she ventured north to Phillips Andover Academy for a summer school experience. In those few short weeks she fell in love and identified her future husband, one James Kingdon of Washington, D.C.

I got that news hot off the press. Marion arrived at Camp Mitchell, senior high camp, floating two feet above the ground. One night that week we sat out on the rocks at the mountain's edge, and she told me all about her dreams of life with Jim. Well I've never been one to make light of teenage love.

You've got to play it smart, though.

Marion and Jim played it smart. She stayed south for college, Emory, he went north, Northwestern. Being slightly older, Marion graduated first and moved to Chicago to be closer for Jim's final year of school. The point now was to begin to learn what it means to love another human being for better and for worse, and to decide if that was something that together they would do.

They took their time. "Measure twice, cut once" is a Milwee-Kingdon family motto.

For Marion's southern blood, Chicago was too (blank), (blank), (blankety-blanken) cold. "Get me outta here." Jim got out a map, she pointed south, and there was Charlottesville: beautiful, intellectual, musical, southern in a certain way, and, in ways Marion also found attractive, not-so-southern too. They loved it here.

For reasons I forget, they moved to Denver: great town, bad move. Folks there brag about their Colorado, Rocky Mountain summers: sunny days, cool nights, wear your sweater, "nice." Wrong! For Marion, "summer" and "sweater" do not belong together in the same sentence. For Marion, warm days/cool nights is right for April, not July. For Marion, summer is when it is warm enough to shuck your clothes and dive into the lake at midnight, no goose-bumps, and float out and admire the moon.

So they got the heck out Colorado and moved back home, to Charlottesville, to settle down and make their life.

There came a time when Marion and I were out of touch. Have you ever known anyone who felt less compunction to answer the phone, or return a call?

When Richard fell ill, we re-connected. Marion was barely pregnant when her father died. We were glad that at least he lived to hear the good news he had a grandson on the

way. He didn't live to learn that Marion was sick. She was glad, she said, her father had been spared that. It would have been hard for him to bear.

John Richard Kingdon joined the family February 13, 2005: a perfect blessing. Then doctors went hard to work, giving Marion their very best. It paid off big. Marion returned to the picture of health for days, weeks, then months, and finally years. These were golden years, wouldn't you agree, as Marion emerged an extraordinary human being: brave, composed, balanced . . . as wise a friend, as good a mother—gentle, firm and savvy—as you could hope to know. She and Jim made good on the promises and vows they made. As husband and wife they fought the good fight. They kept the faith.

Over the last four years, I have rarely missed a day of asking God to make this cancer go and stay away. I know that you were praying too. God knows we all did what we could, but in the end we couldn't beat the odds.

On Sunday evening, with fresh hugs and kisses from her loving son and husband, she lost the fight.

What we going to *disbelieve* concerning this?

I speak as a priest, a Christian.

We won't believe we have to find the reason, or even suppose there is one beyond the simple laws of genetics, chemistry and the environmental sciences. Thomas Aquinas taught us that. God made these laws to do real work. They just do what they do, and it is a mistake to confuse their purposes with God's.

We won't believe that cancer isn't evil. It is natural evil, in the classic sense: *privatio boni*—the privation of the good. We have been deprived of Marion, a unique, delightful embodiment of the good. Her death is a heart wrenching loss—its reach, incalculable.

We won't believe we can or should attempt to gloss that over.

But neither will we believe that all of this is sound and fury, signifying nothing. When she said that, I remind you, Lady Macbeth had just been caught out in conspiracy and murder. All her plans were founded on the proposition that life comes to nothing in the end.

We do not believe that's true. We disbelieve in the finality of death. We set our hope on Christ, and entrust Marion to him. He deserves that trust, completely.

I was here a week ago last Saturday, eight days before she died. That night Jim invited me to read a bedtime story to my Godson, John. I get to do that almost every time I come. John and I love many of the same books, including everything by Richard Scarry, creator of Goldbug, and Mistress Mouse.

That night Jim handed me a book of Bible stories to read to John. I, resisting type-casting I suppose, said “This is nice, but give me something else.” Jim went round the corner and told Marion what I’d said, and she got a chuckle out of that. Meanwhile I reached for another favorite, *Madeline*.

In an old house in Paris, that was covered with vines,
Lived twelve little girls, in two straight lines.

Jim tells me Marion listened to the story from the other room, and when I went in to say good night, she was fast asleep.

Here’s a Bible story for you: just a little taste.

And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, to a virgin espoused to a man, whose name was Joseph, of the House of David, and the Virgin’s name was Mary.

And the Angel said to her: Fear not, for you have found favor with God, And behold, you shall conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name, Jesus.

I believe you know the rest.

In that encounter, Mary stands for all of us. Her womb is the womb of all creation.

Now that’s a story: beautiful, heartbreaking, rich in symbol, mysterious. And in all the ways that count the most, for Jim, and John, and Marion, so help me God, I do believe its true.

So, dear child, Depart.

In the Name of God the Father Almighty who created you;
In the Name of Jesus Christ who redeemed you.
In the Name of the Holy Spirit who sanctifies you.
May your rest be this day in peace,
And your dwelling place in the Paradise of God.