

Velma was 82 when I knew her, one of those people in life others not only notice but clamor to be around. Velma was a walking story....from her Sunday morning hats to her Wednesday morning gardening gloves. She rarely missed the weekly work days at church and was often the only woman to show up.

Velma personally cared for the corner of the church grounds known as Eden's Garden...named in memory of her late husband. People would chuckle and say, as if they were the first to ever utter these words, "We have our own Garden of Eden and Velma is in charge!"

Eden's garden was a beautiful little nook nestled between the jutting corners of the old wing of the church built in the 50's. There was a gravel path a huge stone with chiseled words and a bench to sit on....and there was always something blooming, Velma made sure of that.

But, not all was perfect in Eden's garden and Velma was not shy about speaking of the past tragedy that had occurred when one misguided man drastically pruned the magnolia tree which was the center piece of her little kingdom. The pruning, which left the tree severely scarred.....also caused too much sunlight to flood the area....which in turn slowly killed all the delicate shade loving plants.

Velma would say with her hands on her hips. "Those men should have never come near that tree. I have to start all over, but I'll get it done!" Let's just say the men of the church were very careful when stepping into the garden from that point on. Let's just say, Velma always had an eye on them, even when she wasn't there! And I'm convinced she still watches over that corner of the earth with great interest and care!

Velma possessed another passion and gift.....she was a painter....a watercolorist. Several of her creations hung around the church building. When I made the connection that Velma was an artist, I plopped myself down next to her to learn the basics of painting with water colors.

She agreed to work with me. My first lesson was to carry a tiny notepad of paper and a pencil and sketch shapes, objects and scenes that caught my eye. Velma said she needed to find out if I had perspective.....because.....and I remember her looking intently when she spoke these next words, "Because it is all about perspective."

It's all about how you see what you are looking at....the shadows, the corners, the angles, the light. "Show me if you have perspective and then I'll tell you more about mixing colors. But we can't do anything more until we establish your ability to have perspective," Velma made that absolutely clear.

Without knowing it....She was speaking the very words the Psalmist had spoken generations earlier, words that are as rich and mysterious and beautiful as water color

paints running across the face of thick paper filling in the tiny crevices, mixing together to create a story worth remembering, worth telling....a story with perspective.

Psalm 8 is the first of its kind....the first hymn or song of praise in the psalter....celebrating who God is and what God has done. The eighth Psalm is the beginning of music written for pipe organs....the kind of song that fills us up to overflowing.....that makes us sing at the top of our lungs.....that fills the sanctuary from wall to wall with energy, and joy...the kind of song that gives perspective.

And this is the perspective.....God's power and love is as big and bold as the majesty and joy found in the imagery of Psalm 8.

In other words, God is sovereign. God is all powerful and there is no other power the power of God. God is sovereign.....and at the same time God chooses to be mindful of and caring for humanity.

God is sovereign and compassionate all in the same life creating breath. God is sovereign and grace all in the same reality.....and this is one of those Reformed and Presbyterian affirmations that is non-negotiable.

Though we affirm a variety of beliefs concerning God....the sovereignty and grace of God trumps all else in our perspective.

God's loving, grace filled sovereignty is over and above all else.....over and above our desire and rights for freedom....over and above our accumulated knowledge.....over and above our own ideas of and expectations for power.

Perspective.....God is over and above us....but at the very same time chooses to be mindful and caring for us....chooses to be with and for us.

If there is one painting that should be hung on the walls of the sanctuary and imbedded in our hearts....this is the one....

Psalm 8.....telling the story of God's power and love.....of God's power to love...of God's power infused with love of God's love marked by power.

I'm not sure this is an easy concept for us humans. We know power. We know love. But mixing the two can become a complicated issue for us. Power has the ability to skew love...to make it something it isn't....just as love has the tenacity to affect power. To have both power and love and remain in a healthy life balance is indeed a challenge for us most days.

We speak of power and we have visions of control.....with power....we believe we have control of our lives which leads to independence....and with independence....we have less need to rely on others. More simply put with power we come to believe we can do what we want when we want. Our power gives us control.

Ahhhhh.....the power to control. That was a lesson from Velma on another day. "This is why some artists don't like to use water colors. Unlike oil based paints, water color paints are more difficult to control," Velma taught me. "But, it's also

the beauty of watercolors,” she added. “Sometimes the water colors have a mind of their own and in the process create beauty you didn’t anticipate. Sometimes the unpredictable creates beauty beyond our pre-conceived notions.”

That’s when I began to understand the spiritual nature of painting with water colors.....the process requires both give and take.

The artist comes to the paper with ideas and a plan and with skills to choose colors and to place the colors on the paper.....but in the end the randomness of the watery paint and the porous paper is beyond the artist’s control.

I’ve yet to talk to a watercolorist about their work without them pointing out the surprises that came their way. “I couldn’t get this part of the cloud to cooperate with me.” Or, “I was so surprised as to how these two colors blended. I didn’t plan it...but I like how it turned out.”

Again, the words of the Psalmist –

God made us and I like how we turned out.

We are a fine mixture of God’s best....of God’s power and love.

And at our best God’s power,

God’s love seeps out into the world.

And when we leave space enough....God has space to do what God does best.

And that was Velma’s last lesson.

She was teaching me about the use of white when creating a water color painting.

Standing near one of Velma’s paintings the following was shared:

Do you see the white in this painting. The water, the rushing river is a combination of whites. It was Velma’s favorite painting. She proudly said, “I figured out how to take advantage of the beauty of white.

White in watercolor painting is not paint. It is paper. The artist must leave space for the white. It’s a difficult thing to do, especially for the beginner painter. In the beginning you are tempted to use as many colors as possible. As you learn.....you begin to learn how to leave room for white.

The same is true for our lives....leaving room for God....space for God.

So now I leave you with Velma’s last lesson.

Her story is now your story.

What must we do to leave space for God’s power and love to seep out into our lives?

In the name of God the Creator,

God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer. Amen.

