

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church, July 8, 2018  
Today's sermon is a chapter from Pastor Bill's forthcoming book

Grandma  
*by Bill Chadwick*

There's an old story of a little girl coloring away in Sunday School class, tongue jammed firmly in the corner of her mouth, brow furrowed in concentration.

"What are you drawing?" asked her teacher.

"God."

Thoughtful pause, then gently, "But, honey, nobody knows what God looks like."

"They will when I'm finished."

The Sunday School teacher was right: nobody knows what God looks like. Any time we attempt to speak of the Divine Mystery, we do so recognizing how inadequate all our descriptions are. We can only hint at that which is beyond comprehension and certainly beyond our words.

Nevertheless, I'll have a go: God is like my grandma.

I recognize the audacity of that statement. Let me explain.

My grandmother had twenty-one grandchildren. But I was her favorite.

In my warmest memories of Grandma, I am always about seven or eight years old. A kind of golden age, when a little independence and responsibility have put babyhood behind you, but the pressures and insecurities of pre-adolescence are still distant on the horizon.

One such memory: "Boys! Boys! My blood pressure!" Grandma was scampering around the outside of the circle of swinging legs and arms, squeals

and laughter, a circle made up of my three older boy cousins, ages ten to fourteen, wrestling on her living room floor, laughing and punching and kicking, though careful not to actually hurt anybody. I, being a few years younger and half their size, sat a safe distance away at the edge of Grandma's living room, horrified at my cousins' disrespect. "Boys! Boys!" Grandma continued to scold, trying to grab a whirling foot or arm to pull them apart. Utterly futile. My cousins completely ignored her pleas, which upset me. I didn't want Grandma to be distressed, because she loved us so.

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"Stop now! Let's make some popcorn balls." That got their attention.

Maple syrup was warmed on the stove while Grandma popped a giant bowl of popcorn. The syrup was poured all over the popcorn and then we all slathered our hands in butter and clumped the popcorn into snowball-sized balls to eat while we watched cartoons. So fun!

Grandma was synonymous with food. She loved nothing better than to cook golden-brown turkeys, steaming mashed potatoes, sweet potato casserole and delectable dressing; to bake apple and pumpkin pies and chocolate cakes. And no one, but no one, produced gravy like Grandma's. The aromas wafting out of her kitchen . . . Heaven can't smell any better.

If you were looking for a Midwestern grandmother, my grandma, Daisy Mae Brown, was right out of Central Casting—short and round, wrinkly and smiley, an apron invariably tied around her waist and smelling of talcum powder and whatever she had just been cooking. Every Thanksgiving and Christmas Day were spent at Grandpa and Grandma's house, with each of the four children and all twenty-one grandchildren. Directly behind the house was the town park with an ice-skating rink and warming house and a huge sledding hill. (When I drive past now, I am astounded at how much that hill has apparently shrunk.) Between Grandma's incredible food, the exhilarating speed and heartiness of cold-weather games, and *twenty* other kids to play with, those holidays generated memories for me that were pure Norman Rockwell.

We also spent many summer days at my grandparents' cabins. Two little cabins next door to each other on a small lake "Up North," a peculiarly Minnesotan term. Grandpa and Grandma would stay in one cabin, and their four adult kids and their families would come up, one family at a time, to stay in the other. Each morning Grandma was the first one up. Breakfast was steaming pancakes or waffles, sizzling bacon and sausage, warm blueberry muffins slathered in butter. All made from scratch. Lunch might be only sandwiches and potato salad. But supper? Some combination of fried fish, homemade soup and rolls, hamburgers, baked chicken, corn on the cob dripping in butter . . . Company tended to drop in right at mealtime.

After supper, a few of us would clamber into Grandpa's 14-foot aluminum fishing boat with the white Johnson 3-horse outboard motor and begin putt-putting slowly around the lake. (Grandma didn't participate. She couldn't swim and she didn't like to touch fish until they had been turned into fillets.) We trolled nothing but identical green Lazy Ike lures, catching many weeds—"Irish bass," my Grandpa called them—and usually a few modest northern pike, mostly "hammer handle" size. When the sunset turned from orange to red to purple, and darkness settled over the lake, the loons would begin their maniacal calls and the mosquitos would drive us inside, banging the screen door behind us. (To be clear, *we* banged the screen door, though the mosquitoes seemed large enough to do so.)

Waiting for us would be the little black-and-white TV turned on to the Minnesota Twins baseball game, a jigsaw puzzle on the card table, and the smell of a giant bowl of buttered popcorn.

Yes, food was how Grandma, and I suppose many of the women of that generation, showed love. Enthusiastically consuming that food was how we recipients returned that love. For Grandma, a meal in which we took only a second helping of everything showed that we clearly didn't love her. Our groans were ignored. "Oh, just have a little bit more. I don't want leftovers."

For a growing boy, time with Grandma was idyllic.

I know what you're thinking. That the glow of nostalgia has blinded me to my grandmother's shortcomings. Or that I've romanticized her and her fine-smelling kitchen to the point that she could hardly be a real, complex person.

Okay, in terms of shortcomings, I guess I did know my grandma to enjoy a juicy tidbit of gossip. She lived in a small town and liked to know *everything* going on.

As for her personal history, I know very little about Grandma's early life. It was only long after she was gone that I learned that she had overcome significant adversity. When she was a little girl, her father was murdered. Then her husband, my grandpa, was verbally abusive the first dozen years of their marriage, until he stopped drinking.

To us children, Grandma projected the impression that she'd never had a bad day in her life.

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In addition to those three boys just a little older than I, Grandma's twenty-one grandchildren also included little boys, as well as girls of every age. And babies! There were always babies. Oh, Grandma loved to rock the babies and nibble their tiny toes.

For us older kids, she was always eager to hear what we were doing in school. My brother Cal was the eldest grandchild and a straight-A student. ("Thanks a lot, Cal," was our unanimous thought, at his setting the bar so high.) Gary knew everything about cars. Barb played drums in the marching band. Cousin Tom and my sister Mary were artists. Bob was a star pitcher. Nancy was tall and slender and her teacher suggested she could be a model. Cousin David and my little brother John were both so bright they could talk their way out of any trouble, and they got lots of practice. Terry had freckles and glowing golden-red hair and the accompanying gift of blarney. Vicky loved horses . . .

So many grandchildren! But, as I mentioned, I was Grandma's favorite.

Okay, she never put it in so many words, but it was clear to me. How she would light up when I came into view and envelop me in a soft, sweet-

smelling hug. How she would make my favorite foods when she knew I was coming. How she exulted over any and all of my achievements—in music or athletics or academics. (And they weren't all that tremendous.) How she was absolutely devastated when she learned I planned to go to seminary in California. “*Two thousand miles away!*” she lamented incredulously.

Oh, she loved me!

Imagine my surprise when I discovered that every single one of my cousins and siblings believed that she or he was Grandma's favorite.

*What?!* Obviously, they were mistaken.

But of course they weren't. Grandma treated each one of us as if he or she were the most cherished grandchild. She gushed over every one of us and made everyone's favorite dish. She might have found some of us easier to *like* than others, though she never let on if that were so. I'm absolutely sure she *loved* each of us the same.

Loved us absolutely. Enormously. Without reserve or qualification. And with enough to go around for everybody. If you are not as lucky as I was in the grandmother department, I invite you to borrow mine to use as an example of this kind of unconditional love.

Grandma loved us beyond words. Though I never needed to give it any thought, I knew with every cell of my being that there was nothing I could do to change that love.

I could be an ax murderer and she wouldn't stop loving me. I could disappoint her, and sometimes I did. But nothing I could do would stop her from loving me. So I tried not to disappoint her; not in order to *earn* her love, but in response to it.

Remember all that roughhousing my cousins did, that so distressed Grandma and me? In hindsight, by inspecting that memory and looking closely at the look on Grandma's face, and the tone of her voice, I now realize I was the only one who was really that distressed. I think Grandma knew she made the roughhousing even more enjoyable for the boys if she pretended to be furious.

The rumpus was always over in a few minutes and I don't recall any lasting injuries to humans or furniture. She liked kids to be kids and to have some fun.

A grandmother's love—I like to think that this is how God feels about each one of us. How God feels about you.

In the Church, we call it grace.