

Good evening,

I would like to start by thanking my Advisees for their willingness to participate in this evening's service and Reverends G and B for allowing me the opportunity to share a bit of my story with you all. This is my 17th year in education and, yet, this is the 1st time I have ever worked up the courage to give this Chapel talk. Over the years, I have sat in congregations like this one thinking, "What would I talk about if I were the one standing in front of everybody?" And, for 14 of those 17 years, I have always settled on the same topic - which is one I have really never spoken about before. With your permission, I am going to speak about my sister: Bethany Anne Guldin.

A common question people tend to ask me is, "do you have any siblings?" Every time people ask, I hesitate to answer. Should I say I am the youngest of 4? Should I just say I have 2 older brothers and spare myself an awkward moment?

Or should I be fully honest and say I am the youngest of 4 - I have 2 older brothers but my sister, who was 14 years older than me, passed away in 2012 after a short fight with cancer.

It was March 2011 and I was sitting on the couch in the living room of my sister, Beth's, new house that she and her boyfriend, Brian, had bought rather than spending the money on a wedding. She was not feeling well so we were just watching TV. She eventually felt bad enough that I took her to the hospital where bloodwork showed irregularities in the function of her kidneys. She would need a nephrostomy - or an opening in her back that would allow urine to drain directly into a bag rather than through her bladder, which we also learned was not functioning properly. A few days passed before my family was informed that Beth had been diagnosed with an aggressive cancer located in her kidneys and bladder.

The treatment for this would be intense. The doctors recommended 4 rounds of chemotherapy, each of which lasted 3 weeks, followed by an invasive surgery with a long recovery period afterwards. One would think that a cancer diagnosis was bad enough, however, the recommended surgery involved the removal of several organs in my sister's body, one of which was her uterus. My sister, the person who valued family more than anyone else I know, would never have the chance to have a baby.

Given the timing and the nature of the cancer, the doctors wanted to start treatment as soon as possible. They were willing to make one concession - that Beth be able to go through fertility in hopes of harvesting eggs that could later be used to start a family. So, that is what we did. Beth went through the full process but, devastatingly, did not have any success. It was up to her whether she wanted to try again or begin the chemo, knowing that things would only get worse for her the longer she waited to start treatment.

She chose to start the chemo - a choice that must have made her feel numb and nauseous all at the same time.

For the next 12 weeks - the summer of 2011 - Beth would travel to Philadelphia once per week and experienced all of the symptoms that people undergoing chemotherapy treatment would feel or see. She was weak, lost her hair, had no appetite and often could not keep food down anyway. She had good days but many were rough. Her boyfriend, Brian, was the grounds manager at an understaffed golf course about an hour from where they lived. I wanted Brian to be able to be home with Beth, so I took a summer job working for him at the golf course - mowing fairways and greens and raking sand traps.

I went once with my sister to her treatment. She could not drive herself because the treatment wiped her out afterwards. Beth could find the humor in anything and loved to laugh - but the chemotherapy seemed to impact her spirit like it did her body. And, while it was hard for me to see my sister in so much pain, I cannot even fathom what it must have been like for my mother... or my father... who took Beth to most of her treatments and who were by her side every step of the way.

The chemo treatments stopped in August, giving Beth a chance to recover before her September surgery. I had to return to Woodberry in August to prepare for school but was able to return home the weekend before the scheduled surgery. Beth had regained some energy by then and was feeling well enough to go for a drive. She drove me to a local ice cream place and then we cruised around, with the windows down, listening to one of her - not my - favorite artists - Prince. I did not know it at the time but that would be the last time my sister ever drove a car.

Beth had her surgery and all went according to plan. We were told it would be a long and slow recovery. She was released from the hospital sometime in October. My family decided to have Thanksgiving at Beth and Brian's house that year since it was still difficult for Beth to travel at that point - but she was indeed feeling better, little by little, day by day. I remember thinking that Beth was supposed to be getting better and that, by Christmas, I expected she would be back to her normal self. I wanted my family to come to Woodberry for Christmas that year because I figured if Beth could travel, that would be a sign that she had beat or was continuing to beat the cancer. Everyone did make the trek to Virginia, including Beth and Brian. I remember that Beth was tired most of the time - but she had made it to Virginia and made it back home - so she must have been getting better, right? I did not know it at the time but that would be the last time my sister travelled anywhere and I think she did it because I asked her to.

In January, Beth was still not feeling well. She was scheduled for a follow up and I decided I wanted to be there with her and my family for the appointment. I left Woodberry during the peak of swim season and went to Philadelphia. I remember - I was standing at the foot of Beth's hospital bed in a corner room with a clear sight down the long hallway towards the elevators. I saw Beth's doctors come off the elevator next to each other. Before they made it halfway down the hall, I knew what they were about to say because their body language said it all. In all the empty cavities where Beth's organs once were, cancerous masses had taken root and grown. She was not strong enough to undergo another surgery or more chemotherapy at that point, so she was released home and placed on hospice.

After spending some time with my family, I returned to school - teaching and coaching while awaiting news at any moment. January turned into February which, in swimming, is championship meet season. My kids had been training for 6 months and they were chomping at the bit to perform at states. I felt that I should be home with my sister. But she wanted me to be at Woodberry, coaching the kids through to the end of their season. I left because she told me to.

On February 18, 2012 - my mother, my father and my sister watched Woodberry win the Virginia state championship swim meet from the living room of my sister's house, where she was laying in a hospital bed that had been brought there by hospice. My mom said it was the last time my sister smiled.

I was scheduled to be in Philadelphia the following weekend for the final meet of the season: Easterns. The team and I left on Thursday for the Friday-Saturday meet. On Friday, February 24, 2012 - my sister took her last breath, less than 1 year after being diagnosed with cancer. On Saturday - my mother called to give me the news that my sister had passed away. She waited to tell me because my sister wanted me to be where I was, finishing out my final meet.

When I was younger, Beth and I were not that close. She was 14 years older than me - so there was a big life-experience gap. When she would have sleepovers with her high school friends, my dad would encourage me to be the annoying little brother and wake all of them up by jumping on them. When she was in college, I was 5 and living a completely different life than she was. She lived at home for a few years after college and I would always ask whoever she brought home to play Goldeneye on Nintendo 64. It was not until I got older that we grew close. Beth was proud of me and supported everything I did. I have a fond memory of her and my brothers

showing up to my high school state swim meet dressed up in their own high school varsity jackets, shouting across the pool "Gregory!" We both had the same ideas of what it meant to be a family. I counted on her advice and she never failed to make me laugh. We had high expectations of the people around us and we both tended to put other people first.

Beth was 38 when she passed away, the same age that I am now. I cannot imagine facing what she faced nor can I begin to comprehend how my parents dealt with her diagnosis and death. Sometimes I ask myself, "Who am I?" or "Why am I the way that I am?" While those are hard questions for anyone to answer, I hope I am as loving and as steadfast as my mother, as disciplined and as hard-working as my father, and as caring and as thoughtful as my sister, Beth. I believe it was she who taught me the value in the lesson, "It's not about you". She taught me that lesson in life and through her death. While I was not there when she passed on, I believe I was where she wanted me to be and she wanted me to be there because that was where I was most needed.

Beth was a special person. I miss her dearly and not a day goes by where I don't remember something about her.

I am so grateful to all of you for allowing me the opportunity to talk about her.
Thank you.