

Heidi Nicole Jones
6/23/78-2/5/12

Early on in Jesus' ministry he spent time traveling from town to town. He would preach and teach and heal people's hurts. Word spread quickly: *This man is a miracle worker. He's got tremendous power. He might even be a prophet.* One day, we read in Matthew, the crowd gathered around Jesus was filled with people hungering for a word from God. And Jesus shared the words we heard earlier: *blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the meek, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the peacemakers, blessed are those who mourn.* With every phrase Jesus promises a more hopeful future: one of comfort, or mercy, or a place in God's family.

I've always found the Beatitudes to be a little bittersweet. On the surface they sound so hopeful and good – it's that word: blessed, blessed, blessed. But when you really listen, Jesus isn't talking about people whose lives are all together. These 'blessed' ones are in pain. They face hardship. They struggle and have broken hearts and maybe don't feel very close to God at all.

It's both sweet and bitter that Jesus' words are so fitting today. Because in both senses of the word, Heidi Nicole Willard Jones was blessed.

That blessing started the day she came into the world, June 23, 1978. Heidi was the second of Mike and Barb's three beautiful daughters. Mike's career with IBM meant the Willards didn't live too long in any one spot. Every couple of years they packed up and headed off to a new town. That kind of life isn't for everybody, but for Heidi it just meant new people to meet and new places to explore. When Heidi was preschool-age the family moved to Peoria. Not long after they settled in to their new house, Heidi went out to play in the big fenced-in backyard. After a few minutes, Barb went out to check on her ... no Heidi. Somehow she'd managed to scale the fence. You can imagine the Barb's panic, at least

until she found Heidi happily eating cookies and chatting away at a house down the street. That's certainly one way to get to know your new neighbors.

One of Heidi's favorite spots was at her grandparents' farm back in SW Minnesota. Though, Heidi tendency to be accident-prone meant a trip to the farm usually also meant a trip to the emergency room. More than once she came home with a new set of stitches to show off. But if anyone could wear stitches well, it was Heidi.

Growing up, Heidi was fun, and funny. She didn't take herself too seriously. She loved to sing and write songs and play piano and would do anything for anybody. She had a big heart, a soft spot for misfits ... from animals to people, they just seemed to find her. And she loved them.

Ask anyone to describe Heidi and you'll hear words like *compassionate, kind, giving, friend*. They'll tell you of her goofy side, her klutzy side, her free spirit. She could light up a whole room with her beautiful smile. She was blessed, and a blessing, for those who loved her.

Along the way, though, Heidi made some choices that made her life terribly hard. That's why the grown-up Heidi knew the shadow side of the Beatitudes, too. The one that knows what it's like to crave, to long for a word of blessing because you don't feel it or think you deserve it. Somewhere along the way Heidi's free and adventuresome spirit got waylaid by life's challenges. She never seemed to find her place, her groove, as she grew. She went to school, and fell in love, and got married, and had children ... but still, she carried heavy physical, emotional and spiritual burdens. That heart that could care so deeply could also be deeply hurt. And Heidi did hurt.

Two years ago, we tried something new here at Zumbro during our Christmas Eve services. It was a blessing of the families. Any family that wished could come forward for prayers and to ask God to be with them. Heidi and Kenny were there holding Arianna and

Aiden. Their little family was so beautiful, but when Heidi started talking about what we could pray for, their pain came spilling out all over. *We need God's help*, she said. *Please pray for that for us.*

How does a vivacious person like Heidi end up so lost? God only knows. We can make ourselves crazy asking that question, spinning around and around with *what ifs* and *if onlys*. Heidi was so much more than alcohol and drugs and depression. She was a daughter, a sister, a wife, a mother, a friend. She had hopes and dreams that never came to be. She found strength in the only way she could, and ultimately, those things ended her life too quickly.

So where do we find a word of comfort? I turn to those words of Jesus. *Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* That's the message of the gospel: that when we can't, God can. We can't fix problems or undo addictions or turn back the hands of time to relive our lives. But God's arms are always open. God's love is never-ending. And God can and will find a way to make all things new.

Last summer Heidi took the time to write notes to people who have meant something to her. One of the things she wrote was "I want my friends to learn not to judge, that life is short. Show compassion and leave the world a better place. I love all the people who have touched my life."

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. May the God who created Heidi, who claimed her in baptism, who knew her inside and out, who walked with her in the light and in the dark, give her the blessing she so desired. And may God bless us, too, with comfort and with peace. Amen.