

Philip Mears Homily
May 31, 2025
The Rev. Lori Erickson

We gather here today in love and remembrance, to honor the life of Philip Mears and to entrust him to the holy mystery that surrounds all of life and death.

On behalf of his family, I welcome you. Each of us represents a different part of Philip's life. Among us today are his family, friends and neighbors, his colleagues from the legal community, his clients, his fellow gardeners, people who admire gardens, members of New Song and Trinity Episcopal Churches, and loved ones who will view this service online.

Today we form something of a living Venn diagram—each circle represents a different part of Philip's life, parts that are normally mostly separate but that now come together in this sacred time. We stand at the center where these diverse circles meet, bearing witness to a life well lived.

I'm part of several of these circles. My husband Bob and I have lived next door to Philip and Julia for thirty-five years. We had the pleasure of watching Maggie and Katie grow up, and when our own two sons were young and rambunctious, we soon figured out that preserving our friendship with Philip required doing our best to keep them from running roughshod through his garden. Years later, our son Carl worked in the Mears law office, becoming one of the many young lawyers Philip mentored with care and wisdom. And for many years now, we've worshiped together nearly every Sunday as fellow Episcopalians. Our ties to the Mears family run deep, and like many of you, we mourn Philip's passing with heavy hearts.

Much of Philip's life was lived in the public eye, especially through his distinguished legal career and his remarkable garden, which became both a community treasure and a force for good, raising an amazing \$30,000 for local food banks. His obituary, which is in your bulletin, gives an overview of his accomplishments, and later this morning there will be speakers who will give added perspectives on various parts of his life.

But there was another part of Philip's life that I would guess was less visible to many of you, and that was his quiet commitment to a spiritual path. Philip—as I'm sure you know—wasn't one to talk much about theology, at least in public. But his life was deeply rooted in the values of his faith.

His quiet witness brings to mind a saying attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: Preach the gospel always. If necessary, use words.

Philip didn't need many words, because it was his life that spoke volumes, especially his devotion to his family and his steadfast commitment to justice, including his tireless advocacy for those on the margins of society.

In a world where Christianity is so often associated in the public eye with judgment, exclusion, and political power plays, Philip embodied a very different vision. He stayed true to the original wellsprings of his faith—the kind of faith that lifts up the poor, welcomes the stranger, and seeks the common good. Philip had a kind of moral clarity that didn't need to announce itself, because it showed in how he lived, how he worked, and how he treated others.

The readings chosen by the Mears family for this service reflect that commitment. We heard from the prophet Micah: “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” And from Paul's letter to the Romans: “Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need... live at peace with everyone.”

And most significant of all, we heard from the Gospel of Matthew—words that remind us that when we offer food to the hungry, welcome the stranger, care for the sick, or visit those in prison, we are not only offering love to others, we are meeting God face to face.

When I was speaking to Katie and Maggie a few days ago, they said something that I think provides a window into Philip's life but also gives a message to the rest of us. They said that for much of their childhood, one of their dad's cases involved the right of people to receive psychiatric medications while in prison. Before he won the case in the Iowa Supreme Court, prisoners had to “earn” the right to receive their medications through good behavior—which was a terrible Catch-22, of course, because their untreated mental illness often made good behavior impossible.

Katie and Maggie said that they thought part of the reason their dad loved to garden was because it gave him a counterbalance to his often hard and frustrating legal work. In the garden, things make sense. When you grow something, it's right there in front of you. The fruits of your labors are visible. And when he turned his

garden into a way to help others—raising money, five dollars for a jade plant here, ten dollars for a hosta there—he knew he was making a concrete difference, and that the money was going to put food on the tables of people in need.

So Philip's garden wasn't just about flowers—it was a living expression of his character and values. Beauty for its own sake, yes, but also beauty that fed the hungry and welcomed stranger and friend alike.

And one of the lessons we can take from Philip's life, I think, is that we need both kinds of work in our lives. We need the long view, the willingness to take on hard things, to chip away at tasks so large we wonder if we'll ever see the end of them. We need to do our part, even when it's small, even when it fails, even when the fruits of our labor may not appear in our lifetime.

But we need something else, too—something that feeds our souls. We need beauty. We need the tactile and the tangible. We need conversations with neighbors about bluebells, and the small miracle of discovering something beautiful growing where we didn't plant it.

It doesn't have to be gardening. It might be cooking, or playing music, or walking the same trail each morning, noticing its changing beauty. We need the things that root us, that steady us, that stitch us into the quiet grace of the day-to-day.

It feels entirely right to me that my last conversation with Philip was about flowers. I was on my way somewhere when he stopped me on my way to the car. "There's something I want to show you," he said, and we walked together to a spot where a new set of blooms had emerged. We just stood there, admiring it. You don't need many words to appreciate beauty. You just need to take the time.

And it also feels deeply fitting that Philip's last act in this life was one of service. For decades, he and Julia had washed the tablecloths for the Agape Café breakfast, a small but essential part of a ministry that has welcomed and fed so many. On his final morning, he was in the laundry room, tending to that task one more time.

It was typical of Philip—no fuss, no spotlight. Just doing what needed to be done, as he had all his life.

And now just a few words about the remainder of our service. This next part—the Eucharist—may be unfamiliar to some of you, but it was a steady presence in Philip's life. He attended this service nearly every week, starting in childhood.

The Eucharist is, at its heart, an act of sacred hospitality. Like Philip's garden, it doesn't require credentials, just a willingness to participate. You'll find some simple instructions in your bulletin, but honestly, it's not that complicated. It's a meal of grace, and everyone is welcome at the table.

And before you come to the altar, we invite you to pause at the bowl in front of the altar, which contains water that's been blessed. Dip your fingers in, and then turn and place a mark of blessing on the forehead of the person behind you. It's something we do at New Song Church, a way of remembering that we belong to one another.

And today, in this moment, may we remember the sacred thread that links us to Philip, to each other, and to a world that, while chaotic and broken in many ways, still holds so much goodness, so much grace, and so much beauty.