

Notes for Julie ceremony....

Now I know how it must have felt to play the lead role in Mission Impossible.

Introduce Julie Peeples in a couple of minutes?

Impossible, but I'll try.

How about this. If the Pope had allowed women in the ministry, she wouldn't be here. But then the United Church of Christ opened its arms to this South Carolina daughter of the Roman Catholic church, and in return got a brilliant young woman who has spent her life ever since opening those same doors to countless others...

Or this. Three years ago a young cancer patient, a refugee from Sudan, needed a bone marrow transplant and her only donor was her brother, still in Sudan. So who led the drive to jump through the diplomatic and financial hoops to get him here for the transplant? Julie, of course. Alice died six months later but the \$20,000 fund they raised had enough left to send her body back home for a proper family burial.

Or this. Recently, as we were gathered in our church expressing joys and concerns as we always do before committee meetings, a young man spoke up quietly. "Bill and I just celebrated our seventh anniversary," he said. You guessed it. It was Julie who had stuck her neck out and conducted the union of this remarkable gay couple – a pioneering occasion in our community. Oh yes, Bill has since chaired our Board of Deacons.

Or this. A baby girl is found dead, abandoned in a trash bin. Her story touches the community, and Julie answers the call to conduct a proper funeral for Baby Jane Doe, as she is called. More than 500 people, strangers, gather, many washed in tears, and hear Julie say, "As for you, little one, daughter of God, beloved, we are sorry ... God is weeping with us and seeking to work good out of this."

Begin to get the picture? But I'm just getting started.

Her first interview at our church was before an administrative committee I happened to chair. I was (and still am) a grizzled former newspaper editor, and one of the other members was the high sheriff of our county of 400,000 people. In 15 minutes we were in awe of this remarkable woman, who had freshly come to us from a crushing experience of being fired (along with her wonderful husband, Paul) from her job as chaplain at Habitat for Humanity in Americus, Ga. For standing up for what was right when complaints of improper activity with female staffers emerged.

After the interview, the sheriff and I looked at each other and remarked in unison. We've got someone special here, and were we ever right.

Now, more than a decade and a half later, she has matured into what I would call, if I were still writing sports, an authentic triple threat – she excels in every aspect of parish

ministry and then some. Whether in leading worship and preaching, whether in pastoral care, whether in leadership at home or in the wider reaches of the United Church of Christ we all love so much, she is simply the best. And those of us whose lives she has touched the most, members of Congregational United Church in Greensboro, say thank you from the bottom of our hearts for honoring her in this way.

I once told her that if she were not already spoken for, I'd like to adopt her – for the only fault I can find with her is that her sermons have ruined my Sunday morning nap.

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