

## REMEMBERING BARBARA KING

By Randall Tremba

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Second Sunday in Lent

Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Jesus said: Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God. (Matthew 5). And love one another as I have loved you. (John 13)

Barbara Marie King was a saint. She communed here with us at the Lord's Table as a sister in Christ and she communed with her brothers and sisters at her beloved St. Agnes. Like no else in these parts, she held these historically and tragically divided Christian communities together in her heart. On Friday in the wake of her death a record number of Protestants communed with Catholics at St. Agnes. That moment was a fulfillment of Barb's lifetime prayer. It was a miracle.

It might take the Vatican a hundred years to figure it out. But we figured it out long ago. And I'm declaring it here and now: Barbara King is a true saint.

Of course, I could have and should have said that publicly long ago but with her on that bench back there I would surely have gotten a songbook or a rotten tomato in the back of my head. She never ever thought she was half as good as we said she was. But she was, in fact, far better than any of us realized. Brilliance and humility are a rare combination. Barb was a true saint.

She was a saint and a rock—a rock we could lean on in times of trouble; a rock that held us up when the world was falling apart. She was a rock for me, for our choir, for this congregation, and for countless friends and neighbors. Her dear husband John knew it better than any. Barb was his rock, too.

John gave Barb the name "King." It is, of course, just a name. But it's a name no saint would seek. Barb took that name and just like our Lord she gave it a radical twist. She turned it upside down and inside out. Like Jesus in our oft-sung song, *Jesu, Jesu*, Barb "knelt at the feet of her friends, silently washing their feet." It was the way of Jesus. It was her way.

Barb prayed, ached and worked for peace and social justice. She never attempted or undertook to do great things; only small things with great love like driving neighbors and strangers countless miles for dialysis treatments, week after week, year after year. She gave her heart and soul as a professional teacher to evoke and nurture the best in children. The poor and forgotten held a special place in her heart.

And I can tell you this: no dogs on earth received more love than hers and John's. Her beloved Wadsworth lived and died in the radiance of her eternal affection. And now Fionna is the latest to be spoiled by endless love and blessings.

Barb was a saint, a rock, and a servant of our Lord.

Over the past 25 years Barb and I have done more than 1500 services together. Sunday services, plus wedding and memorial services by the hundreds. I never once imagined a

time such as this. Her plan was to play on and on and retire the year before I did. Even that one year without her beside and behind me was impossible to fathom. And who of us can fathom what has just transpired? I can't. Our choir can't. Georgiann can't. Kari can't. None of us can. It wasn't supposed to end this way.

Twenty-five years ago this classically educated, classy woman found herself working with a "hick" from Youngstown, Ohio. Without ever saying so in the least, she took me on as a project. Whatever class and sophistication I now possess are due, in large part, to her "coaching me up"—not once by criticism but by genuine and frequent affirmations.

Whenever I happened to say or do something right, she'd say, *I loved what you said today*. Or, after a memorial service she might say: *that was so good the way you got the congregation to laugh at the end. Just perfect*, she'd say. Barb made my heart sing and when you think about it, she enabled literally thousands upon thousands of hearts to sing.

Following an especially poignant service I would often go directly to her at the organ and shake her hand as though she were the "first violinist" of an orchestra because I knew without her any symphony or service would have fallen flat. She'd demur and shake her head as if her role were incidental.

Well, let me tell you: a service without her music would be like a movie without a soundtrack. You hardly notice the music until there's none. Beneath and beyond all the words I have spoken or read in services such as this, her music healed and uplifted thousands of broken hearts without fanfare. Barb was as humble as she was brilliant.

For the past 25 years we sat side by side planning every detail of services such as this. From readings to prayers, from preludes to hymns to interludes, from subtle transitions to tempo and silent pauses. She made copious and meticulous notes. We had our own system of eye signals to keep things on track. No matter how often or how many or for whom, Barb filled every service, every note with grace, compassion and professionalism. Never as an end itself. She did not perform for glory and applause. Applause made her blush.

This morning we need her more than ever. But she's not here. Or so it seems.

A week ago Saturday she played her final service here. It was a memorial service for Michelle Baluch. She didn't know Michelle or her husband Steve, but as always her heart and soul were in every note—from a rare performance of "Ave Maria" as the final prelude piece; to "For the Beauty of the Earth" and "Morning Has Broken"; from "The Prayer of St. Francis" and finally to the last hymn she would ever play: "Here I Am, Lord."

Because most of Michelle and Steve's family are Catholic, Michelle asked if a Catholic priest could be present, especially as a consolation to her elderly and very "old school" catholic mother. Michelle's mother had told her Catholic children that it was OK not to go to the Catholic church as long as they never, ever went to a Protestant church.

Well, that's old school. That's pre-Vatican II.

Michelle and Steve joined SPC two years ago and were glad and faithful members. Going into that memorial service I, of course, shared all of this with Barb as I did most every other odd, painful, silly and joyous stories from various services. Barb eagerly

anticipated the back stories I would tell her about weddings and memorial services. She'd sometimes wince, sometimes laugh but always, always she offered me an understanding heart and full support.

I gladly invited Fr. Mat, pastor of St. Agnes Catholic Church and Barb's official pastor, to share the leadership of Michelle's service. He graciously accepted. At the end he stood right there in front of that old school Catholic mother and pronounced an official Catholic benediction. Every Catholic in the room instantly crossed themselves, breathing, I suspect, a sigh of relief that now their beloved renegade Protestant sister could rest in peace. I don't know for sure, but I'm guessing, Barb crossed herself for the first time ever while sitting on the Presbyterian organ bench. And then right on cue she sounded three chimes.

She would never play another note.

More than any other person on this planet, Barb heard me say over and over: *Life is hard, sometimes very, very hard. But something else is true: Grace abounds.* Barb believed that with her whole heart. And, as it turns out, in those final hours of her life with us, grace found her and led her safely home.

I don't want the grief and sadness I now feel to go away anytime soon. Yes, it hurts. It hurts badly. But this unspeakable grief is only a measure of what we had and what we have lost. And if that's the price that must be paid, I for one will pay it. I will endure the darkness for it shows me the stars.

Sweet grief, O sweet yet bitter grief, come close. Be not afraid. Be our companion until we are healed, well, and whole again.

Let us pray.

Gracious and loving God, help us to see the stars in this darkness. Help us to endure until morning breaks again.