

LISTEN CAREFULLY
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Third Sunday in Lent
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

I will get to the lessons for today but first I must acknowledge our ongoing grief and disbelief. I can't stand here and proceed as if all were normal and well. All is not well. Barbara King has died and left us in shock and dismay.

I could stand here and weep for a month of Sundays. But I won't. You and I need to move on. But we don't have to move on quickly. Next Sunday will be soon enough.

Even as we hold Barbara in our hearts this morning, let's keep the lessons appointed for this Third Sunday in Lent in the back of our minds for they are timely in the wake of Barbara's death or any death for that matter.

*Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in real food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. **Isaiah 55:2-3***

*Jesus said, "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'" **Luke 13:6-9***

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Last Sunday was extraordinary. Amazing grace was all over the place. Tears, laughter and lots of hugs. It almost felt like an Easter Sunday. And now one week later, *this*—our first "ordinary" Sunday without Barbara.

Last Sunday we felt Barbara's absence but not in the way we feel it now. Typically following a death there is a whirlwind of activity. Family and friends rush together. Sympathy abounds. Tears and laughter mingle. There's comfort in the company of many. There's a memorial service to plan and attend. There's food, drink, and conviviality. And then suddenly the music stops, the company leaves and the bereaved are left alone. Today we are the bereaved.

Personally, I'm not looking for immediate relief from this pain and sadness. Grief is the price we pay for love. Grief is not something you whisk away with a pill or therapy session. Grief is something to cherish. Be not afraid. Let grief be your companion—at least for a while.

If several weeks from now you are immobilized or endlessly depressed, by all means seek help from a friend, a pastor, counselor, or physician. We ourselves will offer a session for any and all grieving over this loss or another. Some evening soon we will gather with a counselor to share the sweetness and bitterness of our grief and to open ourselves to healing and new beginnings.

Last Sunday many of us were basking in the miracle we witnessed at St. Agnes two days prior. At Barb's funeral mass on Friday a record number of Protestants communed with Catholics. With Fr. Mat's generous and gracious offer we stepped over barriers to the Table erected by the Vatican. Two historically and tragically divided communities stood together as one. It was a fulfillment of Barb's prayer. Her death opened a door.

Friday at St. Agnes and Sunday here were moments full of wonder and grace. Since then I've looked back over Barb's last week and discovered it too was full of wonder and

grace.

Barb's last Sunday with us was Feb. 14, Valentine's Day but also a "golden" Sunday. It was Transfiguration Sunday so the bulletin was gold. Her prelude that morning was "How Clear Is Our Vocation, Lord." She had carefully selected as usual it in keeping with the gospel lesson for that day in which the fishermen left their nets and followed Jesus to undertake their vocations as servants of love, which means, in part, building the new community, bringing historically conflicted and alienated peoples together around one Table. Barb's vocation, begun in baptism, was clear to her. "How Clear Is Our Vocation, Lord." That was her last prelude.

After the blessing of the nations on that Transfiguration Sunday, we sang *Jesu, Jesu fill us with your love, show us how to serve the neighbors we have from you. Kneels at the feet of his friends, silently washing their feet. Master [or "King," we might say] who acts as a slave to them.*

That phrase about "kneeling" came to my mind as I worked on my tribute to Barb last Sunday. It seemed to fit her so well. She knelt at the feet of her friends, silently washing their feet—in more ways than one.

On that Transfiguration Sunday, we celebrated the Lord's Supper, which had been rescheduled because the previous communion Sunday, Feb. 7, had been snowed out. Because of the rescheduling Barb communed with us on her last Sunday here. She communed then went to the piano and helped us sing: *Come and fill our hearts with your love, you alone, O Lord, are holy.* It was the kind of song chant Barbara encouraged Ethel and me to include in our services. Barb wasn't pushy; but she was glad when so called "catholic" elements such as the *kyrie eleison* found a place in our Presbyterian liturgy.

On that Transfiguration Sunday, the choir sang one of Barb's all time favorite anthems. "Prayer of the Children." As a professional teacher of young children she had a heart for children, for the vulnerable and marginalized. That anthem is a prayer for peace. I know it touched Barb deeply for she herself prayed her heart out and worked her fingers to the bone for peace.

Her postlude was a glad and triumphant piece: *Christ Whose Glory Fills the Skies.* Christ is in the title but Barb always liked it when we translated "Christ" as the icon or sacrament of Love. Her final postlude with us: *Love Whose Glory Fills the Skies.*

The week following her last Sunday with us, Barb spent preparing for three services. A Saturday afternoon memorial service for Michelle Baluch, the Saturday evening service at St. Agnes, and the Sunday morning service here which would be the First Sunday of Lent. Michelle's service Saturday afternoon would be Barb's last.

Barb spent her last week on earth doing what she loved best. Practicing music. For the First Sunday in Lent, she practiced the introit: *Surely It Is God Who Saves Us* and her prelude would have been: *Come, Sing a Song of Harvest.* She asked me if a song about "harvest" was appropriate at this time of year and I remember telling her, "there's always a harvest somewhere." She also practiced *What Does the Lord Require* and the choir's anthem, *I Want Jesus to Walk with Me.*

We'll never know what music Barb would have wanted in her mind and heart if she knew she was about to die. But those were the songs in her heart her final week on earth. And when you think about it: those are pretty good valedictory pieces. They befit the kind of heart and soul she had cultivated by walking with Jesus, which is say, walking with love, for nearly 69 years.

This is a time of darkness. I don't know about you but I listen better in the dark. When you can't see much, the ear becomes more attuned. This is a time to listen carefully for

words of wisdom and grace.

Listen carefully. This is from the lesson in Isaiah. *Listen and you will live. Listen carefully and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in real food.* That, of course, means what we put in our mouth but also what we put in our minds and hearts.

This is a time of darkness. When you can't see much, the ear becomes more attuned. This is a time to listen carefully for words of wisdom and grace.

When the death of another touches us it can awake us to a simple fact: she or he or they are dead; but I am not. And yet I, too, shall die.

This, then, is the lesson from today's gospel. Knowing I, too, shall die, how then shall I live? How can I—like a tree—be fully present and open to all that comes from the sun above me and all that comes from the soil beneath me and all that comes from the community of life that buzzes and blows around me? How, then, we can ask ourselves—how, then, shall we live in the wake of Barbara's death and life?

These words of T. S. Elliot were in the sidebar Feb. 14.

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

This is a time to listen carefully for words of wisdom, love and grace.