

**Memorial Service for Phyllis Staton
The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California**

June 28th, 2009

Feisty and Rooted

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A couple of weeks ago, I attended an ice-cream social held in Phyllis' memory at The Redwoods, where she had resided these past twenty years. I was amazed to find the room filled with people who knew Phyllis. Yet, I probably should not have been amazed at all. It was yet another lesson that everyone who met Phyllis got to know her, and how could we forget her once we had met her? Hers was a feisty presence, refreshingly and sometimes disarmingly honest. We always knew what Phyllis thought. There was never any worry about that! She made no bones about her opinions, likes, and dislikes. But what made that ever-refreshing was that it anchored life around her. You knew where you stood with Phyllis in any given moment. For myself, all Phyllis had to say, "Fr. Richard. . ." and I felt immediately anchored to the spot -- she had my rapt attention!

But the only agenda behind that was her desire to live honestly in the world. . .and to live honestly with her God. In this way, she became a pillar of community, a witness to living in so many ways the way life should be lived -- with a feisty honesty and a zest for life itself: the life of children, the life of family, the life of friends, the life of community.

Her long marriage to John, though I never had a chance to witness it personally, was still a presence and an influence long after his passing. Like Phyllis' own feistiness -- feisty to the end -- their marriage seemed to jump outside of time, and buck even death. That, my sisters and brothers, is the working of the Spirit. No doubt about it. And I think it is in the Spirit that Phyllis often dwelt, for she did what the Spirit often does -- shake things up a little or a lot, make a noise, live a bit loudly (or more than a bit sometimes!) and call out truth.

Phyllis always told me she talked constantly to God. . . and she was always expecting God to reply, "Enough, already!" I doubt God ever did. We can only imagine the chatter God must hear from each of us, let alone the whole of the human family -- which quite simply demonstrates the vast difference between God's perspective and ours: an eternal perspective that must hold Phyllis, John, their family and all of us across time and in every place with an unfathomable and unwavering love. Phyllis lived and must live on in her uniquely feisty way in that love, which nourished life from her roses and the little garden she kept to her neighbors and friends at the Redwoods to our lively discussions each week here in Bible Study and the life of this parish. It was this life that, in the words of today's Gospel, Christ welcomes in her and will never drive away. A life feisty and rooted at the same time! Rooted in the Gospel of love, feisty like roses reaching skyward with color and fragrance in new spring.

It's tempting to claim that growing up with four brothers and sisters and without a father during the Depression in the Midwest made Phyllis tough. And she could be tough. Tough-minded even. She was a straight talker with that incisive wit that could leave anyone breathless. She did me in on a number of occasions -- even I was silenced! But behind that sometimes brusque demeanor was a tender heart. If the Great Depression helped form her earliest experiences, it also taught her a lesson she repeatedly shared with her friends and intimates: You make it work. Period. You make it work maybe because you have to, but more importantly because it's the right thing to do. In a throw-away society, Phyllis was something different entirely. The Gospel for her boiled down to a Gospel of love that remained committed through all the tough things in her life, that held her, her life, her grandchildren and family, and her friendships close, that put down roots even for a feisty soul and claimed community even when things seemed adrift.

Of all of today's scripture readings through which we remember Phyllis, the one that spoke most to her family was Revelation, with its breath-taking image of creation made new and God coming to live at long last in the midst of the human family. It was a vision that Phyllis, I am sure, held closely in her heart. For all the struggles and disappointments of her life, it was an unswerving trust in this vision that kept her going. It was this promise that kept her coming back to this community and seeking the holy presence of God even as she struggled with failing health and memory these past few years. She held tightly to this gracious word through thick and thin. Her God -- and indeed our God of love is not just a source of comfort, but a God who is the process of loving the world back towards wholeness, peace, and justice. A God of transformation. And if Phyllis, now reunited with John and all her roots, is anything at all in the heavenly courts, I imagine her to still be feisty: feisty in God's ear directly now, demanding that the divine get on with it. . . get on with fulfilling the promises made to us and all of Creation, to make us all anew.

I imagine God is listening. Don't you?