

Grace and Sight

In Memory of Pat de Fremery

A Homily by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

December 16th, 2009

The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour, Mill Valley, California

Wisdom 3:1-5, 9; 1 John 3:1-2; John 6:37-40

Pat's request that we not fuss over her death too much sits very much at the center of our attention this day. We might respond as her family has already, "Okay, Pat, we won't fuss. . . Well, at least not too much!"

I am honored to play a part in this honoring of a long, beautiful life, of which I am only a small part – a latecomer, if you will, to a remarkable play that began decades ago. Pat was a dear friend to so many, ever a lively part of this faith community and the wider community around us. Her abundant love, humor, and persistent attention were constant companions for her family and so many who loved her. She organized us, laughed with us, served with us. She listened more closely to the words of our hearts and the ups and downs of our lives than most.

We could simply say, "She is missed already." That indeed is true – we see the sadness and grief of our own hearts. Yet somehow that common phrase doesn't begin to touch her uncommon life, or the witness she gave us over many, many years – over those countless meetings and encounters each of us had with her unassuming, yet ever-perceptive soul.

And we cannot help but pause to reflect on Pat's most remarkable gift: and that was her physical blindness. And I call it a gift, because it was her determination and insistent spirit that made it a gift, a blessing rather than a curse. It is no small accident that so many of the stories of her Christian tradition talk about blindness. In the gospels, we hear it often in the context of what Christ called spiritual blindness – and the ancient ironic story was that it was often the physically blind who were the best spiritually sighted, the least spiritually blind! They were often the first to see God in Christ coming, to recognize the Holy One for who he was, to call him out by name as he passed by.

Pat witnessed to us the profound truth at the heart of our shared spiritual tradition that it is through our very human, physical frailties that we are most vulnerable to the actions and grace of our God. It is through our weaknesses that we are given spiritual strengths: and hers was uncanny. You see, sooner or later, we either succumb to the limitations of our human existence, or we transcend them with imagination, prayer, and wit. Pat so clearly chose the latter – whether it was the way she could chop vegetables without missing, or perceive her God at work in the Body of Christ in ways that those of us who can see with our eyes too often miss.

So our scripture readings this day touch on sight – a sight that Pat had and witnessed to through much of her life. A sight heightened, touched as she was by the divine sense of irony, by her physical

limitations. A sight not rooted in 20/20 vision, but rooted in greater senses of hearing, seeing, and touching with the heart: a sense that calls forth truth from deep places within us. . . The spiritual sense that rises above mortality and touches the Divine right back.

Pat leaves us with this legacy of spiritual spunk, God love her: that spunk that never stooped to mere complaining. That spunk that saw reality and engaged it with a vivacious, feisty love that re-makes things when they falter; a creative energy that flows from the heart of all Creation like running water flows inexorably and unstoppable down the cracks and crevasses of the earth, seeking home. Pat doesn't want us to fuss over her passing, because, as she knew, this parting is the way of all of us sooner or later; and because there are so many greater things in life to fuss about. One of the greatest is getting on with the business of loving and living while we have the time – something she did with abandon. And that means no matter what this life, what our world, filled with its changes and chances, throws our way.

Pat's life was built on a fundamental understanding of how our Savior acts in the world. Her faithful life centered on the profound truths of the essentials of true religious and spiritual practice – ones that involve the renewal of life, rising again from adversity, and, yes, even conquering fear and death. She spoke the language of Christ not always in words, but almost always in deeds. And for that service among us for so long, we are all profoundly thankful, even now as we believe God in Christ conquers death in her and offers us comfort in ways that words cannot convey and our eyes cannot see by themselves.

Above all, Pat leaves us with that abiding Christian virtue of hope. And I don't mean a vain or idle hope, but an active, imaginative one. One that never rests, but is filled with the spark of life, a vim and vigor that holds fast through thick and thin. A hope that we all share with Pat that we, too, might see our Maker. . . that we might see our God, as she must now. . . as she must now see her Creator face-to-face.