

**Sermon for the Memorial Service of Connie Rider
Church of Our Saviour, Mill Valley, California**

Friday, May 7, 2010

Indefatigable

Isaiah 61:1-3, Psalm 42:1-7, Romans 8:14-19, 37-39, John 10:11-16

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There's an old joke about things that rectors – priests in charge of parishes – things that we live in mortal fear of. One is church musicians. Being one myself, I get a bit of a pass. . . well, at least sometimes. But the other two things we live in mortal fear of are the Altar Guild and the Episcopal Church Women! We live in mortal fear of them because they are steadfast institutions of the life of a parish like this one. Without an Altar Guild nothing gets set up for worship and so a priest and people cannot fully pray in the traditions of our faith. Without the Episcopal Church Women, the ECW, much of the service of the church to the wider community would simply have never happened in the past couple of centuries. The ECW now sometimes laments that they are no longer as big or as important as they remember being. But their importance cannot be overstated, for their children and grandchildren are the outreach teams to those in need, the soup kitchens, the church guilds and groups, ministry boards, and fundraising programs – all traditions of service in Christ's name that the ECW initiated and taught us by example over many years.

(You might have thought I picked up the wrong text for this sermon. . .) It almost goes without saying that our beloved Connie was an integral, essential part of the ECW and the Altar Guild in this parish. In some ways, she embodied both. And so three generations of rectors like me learned that Connie needed to weigh in before anything important happened in the life of this community. Even when she was setting down her responsibilities, she was still an emotional anchor, a place to turn. The priests and deacons who worked here over the decades learned quickly that Connie was in charge and learned to nurture a healthy fear of her. She was for such a long time the chief organizer, the go-to person, the keeper of the communal memory and will. She was among the first women to serve on the Vestry of this parish. But she was a leader even before leadership in the Church ceased to be the official domain of men. And so I had the honor of standing with her last summer as she was honored for her decades of leadership from amongst the thousands attending The Episcopal Church's General Convention in Anaheim. It reminded me what a power she was in her own right – never to be trifled with, of course – and so loved and respected by so many.

There are so many words that we could use to describe Connie's character – so many that they are too many to name this afternoon as we gather in her memory before our God in Christ and offer her life up with hymns of praise and prayers of hope.

But here is one word, an old fashioned word that somehow fits Connie's Canadian heritage and the traditions of the church she so loved. And that word is "indefatigable!" Just the way it rolls off the tongue, the way it sounds strong and powerful. . . It reflects Connie's refusal to yield to fatigue, her tenacious grasp of the essence of life itself. It showed up always in her work, but was just as clear over the past several months as her body began to give out. Inside was still that indefatigable character, that life force that was Connie for her family and the people in the community to whom she was forever devoted. Somehow, she outlives us all. We were worn down well before she was!

On one of our visits weeks after she was already confined to her bed, I noted Connie's impatience with her situation. The greatest hardship she faced in her last days was not being able to tend to herself or be in charge, of learning to rely at long last on her loving family and friends who had relied on her in so many ways for countless years and well over three generations. I could only articulate it to her in three words: "Waiting for God," I said – recognizing that waiting was the hardest thing of all when all is made ready. "Waiting for God," I said. . . "But *not* Godot," she instantly retorted with that wry grin that was always hers, that was just, well, so *Connie*. Connie who made no bones about her mind about just about anything and everything. Connie who labored long and hard for every soul she could. Connie who kept watch like the nurse she was trained to be; who stood watch in the evening and morning hours like a shepherdess on the green. Indefatigable Connie, who even near death was teasing herself, me, and even God in that way that stole the show and kept all of us awake and alert even in the difficult moments. "Waiting for God. . .but *not* Godot."

She was *our* Connie, we might say, just as much as we were *hers*. In Connie's world people belonged to one another and had something to do. . .or they were given something to do! That presence that was only Connie's when she came into the office even if just for a visit said without saying a word, "Get with it." There is life to be lived. There are things to be done. There is a community to be tended. To paraphrase Lincoln, I don't suppose Connie was overly concerned whether or not God was on her side. What mattered was that she was endeavoring to be on God's side. And that meant there was the promise of God's justice to be tended, a tradition to be passed on to a new generation, and a well-trimmed vessel like this one to hold the message and the life of God's people as we journey on our pilgrimage.

One of our members describes Connie as a "pillar of the church." And she notes that we don't use that language so much anymore to talk about God's people. Maybe that in part reflects the age in which Connie was in her prime – an age where strong leadership was looked to and

trusted for command and direction. Where a watchful shepherdess on the green was there to keep everybody, including the other leadership (the clergy most particularly!), in line. But more importantly it reflects Connie's living into the call of Isaiah to live into our anointed nature as God's people. To be as Connie was; to be an "oak of righteousness", a "planting of the Lord," where a mantle of praise has replaced a faint spirit, garlands are given in place of ashes, and the oil of gladness rushes down in abundance.

Connie's last words to me were meant for all of us. And those were the simple but profound and rarely given trinity: "I love you." For this community, for all of you whom Connie so deeply loved and cherished. For this Church and the countless lives we touched and reached over the decades Connie labored among us. For God's good earth and a heritage worth living and striving for. For God in Christ himself, the center of Connie's devotion and every good work grounded in sacrament and prayer.

Connie's strength rested on that abundant love that was a gift to her from God. A gift that lifted all of us up to look forward, watchful, and awake. To re-convict us that nothing: "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation" can separate us from that love that is the foundation of all Creation. From where our life comes. That love to which and in which we die. And that love in which we are raised to new life, with Connie and all the indefatigable saints in light.