

Homily for Barbara Williams

Zeph 3:14-17

Philip 2:5-11

John 17: 20-23

The beauty of a long, gradual decline is that there is plenty of time to get ready, if you have the courage and inclination to do so. Barbara did.

So one day in early July, before I left for the General Chapter, Barbara and I sat down to talk about the readings she chose for this liturgy. It was a precious sharing. A lovely smile came onto her face, and I could feel the energy rise in her when she focused on these beloved texts. Let's let her preach to us today as she so often did at St. Joseph's Basilica, Los Gatos and this chapel.

Surely it is true of Barbara, she who gave so much of her time and energy to helping others pray and reflect deeply on their spiritual lives, that she can hear her Lord saying to her: "Shout for joy, O daughter Zion! Sing joyfully, O Israel! . . . The Lord has removed the judgment against you, has turned away your enemies; you have no further misfortune to fear." For Barbara, death was not a misfortune!

And not only does the Lord protect her from deadly misfortune, God is actually singing and dancing over her!

[A little aside: "Lord," for Barbara, was a term of affection, of intimacy, and was not banished from her personal prayer with the advent of inclusive language.] She announced with great conviction: "This is how the Lord looks at me—the Lord **does** look at me this way."

Can we savor that reality for ourselves this minute? Can we let our Lord look on us and tell us "get up, sing and dance! You are mine and I will take care of you! No misfortune is stronger than my love."
(silence)

Of course, this text is addressed to Zion, the whole people! What analogues might we find today? All of us SNJM's? All of us in this chapel who loved Barbara so much? the Church? the downtrodden and marginalized? Especially, I think, this latter, who so much need a word of hope to steady them and keep them going in the face of huge structural evils.

Can we, too, believe that the Lord is present right in the middle of the suffering and struggle, renewing us and our suffering brothers and sisters with his love? Singing over us as a people? Barbara invites us to.

(silence)

The Phillippians reading, also long one of Barbara's favorites, elicited two key insights during our sharing. This text, for her, describes perfectly the reality of the Incarnation. It seals the presence of Jesus with us: "Though he was in the form of God, he did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at. Rather, he emptied himself and took the form of a slave, **being born in human likeness.**" Jesus' first act of humility was to allow himself to join us, to be born as one of us. And then to live his life, just as we must do. If our life is lived "in Christ," we can anticipate a life transformed, as his was." It's not imitation," she insisted, but "**identification.**" The latter, much more profound.

And if Jesus can face into this most human of realities, death, with grace and trust, so, we hope, can we; he has been there before us. Barbara did. She would say to me “I’m a bit anxious, sure, because I don’t know what the path will be like, but at the same time, I’m filled with anticipation.”

Another Barbara vignette here—she told me this story several times these last weeks, and probably told any number of you, about her patron, Robert Bellarmine (for those of you who don’t know, Roberta Marie was her name in religious life): Robert was engaged in a game of cards with several of his colleagues. The subject of death came up, and one of them asked: “If you knew you only had one hour to live, what would you do?” This one said this; that one said that. Robert said: “I would go on doing exactly what I am doing.” That is what Barbara did until the day she died—exactly what she was doing at that moment, knowing that she didn’t have to do anything special to be exactly where God wanted her to be. In both of my last two visits with her after the somewhat abrupt move from Merrill to Fatima, something that she didn’t see coming, she offered, with contentment on her face, “this was a really good move. I am exactly where I should be.”

But the verse leading into the Philippians text was also important to Barbara, speaking as it does of unanimity of spirit based on one love. It’s the phrase: “United in spirit and ideals” that she singled out. Not “uniformity” she noted, but **unanimity** around spirit and ideals. Can we take this as more than Barb’s insight, but also her **prayer** for us in these days when so much seems up for grabs that seemed certain at one time? Can we take this as a prayer for our country during these unsettling days?

(silence)

Our sharing about the Philippians exhortation pointed us directly to the Gospel reading. Barb made a point of insisting that it is not the early part of the Last Discourse, so often quoted, but the last verses that she wanted to highlight: that we may all be one in Christ. Why? “so that the world will know that you (the Father) sent me, and that you loved them as you loved me.” How Jesus wants us to be, then, gives us our mission: to help all people believe that we are one in God.

We noted, she and I, that these are among the very last of Jesus’ words to his disciples. I think these are Barbara’s last words to us: “Be one as Jesus and the Father are one so that everyone will know of God’s precious and particular and personal love.”

(silence)

In the course of our sharing, Barb told me of a spiritual practice she has fallen into in the last few years:

When the host is elevated at the consecration, she would say “These are our bodies, given up with you.” As we move into the Eucharist, I think Barb would love us to adopt her practice today.

Thank you Barbara, for your life and witness, and for your last homily in this chapel.

--Elizabeth Liebert, snjm