



## Memorial Eucharist

Carol Hacker

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For the better part of the last eight months, most of my Thursday afternoons, with an occasional Tuesday or Wednesday thrown in for good measure, belonged to Carol. On those Thursday afternoons with Carol, she and I would talk about birth and death and nearly everything in between that you could imagine. One of the other things we did – well one of the things Carol did – was plan – for all sorts of things. On of those things for which we planned was what would happen here during her memorial Eucharist. Even more specifically, Carol did a great deal of planning regarding what I was to say during this homily. I had to remind her every now and then that her wish to keep this liturgy under an hour and a half might not be compatible with all that she was planning for me to say. When I would tell her this, Carol would get this look of surprise on her face and then just crack up, laughing at herself and her self-confessed need to be in charge of all things – even after her death. At any rate, “we” decided on three points that I was to share with you.

The first point is the story of the Good Samaritan – the story the Assistant to Bishop Allan Bjornberg just read for today’s Gospel. I want you to tell people, Carol said, that I’m not the Good Samaritan – that’s for other people to do. I’m just the inn-keeper, the one who gets paid by the Samaritan to do the long-term care for the ones the Samaritan finds left for dead at the side of the road. Just the inn-keeper Carol? I think not. Yes Carol, you may have been the inn-keeper but you were also the one who diligently searched the sides of the road, looking for the wounded ones whom others had passed by. Carol – searching, always searching for the lost, the last, the least, the unloved – and finding them, Carol would search for just the right innkeepers to care for the ones she found at the side of the road – even if that meant building the inn and becoming the inn keeper herself. And as if this weren’t enough, Carol would find those who had passed the wounded by – people of privilege and power – and she would help them to understand – by whatever means was necessary – that there were victims lying by the side of the road that they, the ones with power, needed to see and care for. What’s more, she would let the ones with power know that there needed to be safe roads so people wouldn’t become victims in the first place. And if the established types wouldn’t listen or were unresponsive, she would get together a work crew and set about building that safe highway herself. And if Carol decided you were going to be on the work crew – well, heaven help you, you were going to be on the work crew. In all of this, Carol was never self-righteous or self-congratulatory about what she did. If anything she was self-deprecating – lamenting that she was not doing enough. What Carol did, she did because God had set these things before her to do. It was that simple – she said she really didn’t have a choice. She said to me one day, “If you see a child in the middle of the road about to be hit by a truck, you run out into the street to rescue him or her. You don’t sit around and wonder if you should do something or not. You just do it. You have no choice.”

Carol spent a good deal of time during her dying days praying the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, and she wanted me to tell you about the Valley of the Shadow of Death that is central to that psalm. The Valley of the Shadow of Death was real for Carol. It had steep sides – more like a canyon than a valley; it was dry, harsh, rugged – and there was no way to climb out of it. And at first, the Valley of the Shadow of Death terrified Carol. But when she stopped trying to climb out of this fearsome valley, Carol turned around and faced the shadow – and she took a good, long and hard look at the Shadow of Death – and then, quite suddenly a great peace came over her. Yes, the Shadow of Death was real – there was no doubt – but peace came when Carol realized that there can be no shadows if everything is dark. There can only be a shadow if a light, a strong

light is shining on the other side of that thing which casts the shadow. Without the light, there is no shadow. And realizing there was a light shining behind the Shadow of Death, Carol came to another valley – this one gently sloping, green, cool, water-fed, peaceful and filled with the flowers and the creatures that Carol so loved. Even the weeds in this new valley were pretty ones. And all was well. And then Carol embraced with every fiber of her being the words of her beloved St. Francis of Assisi, “And you, most kind and gentle death/ Waiting to hush our final breath,/ Oh, praise him, Alleluia!/ You lead to heaven the child of God . . . “

And last, Carol agreed that I would talk about St. Francis of Assisi whose song and whose prayer were a constant source of inspiration for her. The sun, the moon, the stars, the rocks and trees, and every living thing were to St. Francis, sisters and brothers with him, all children of God. So too for Carol. The sun her brother, the moon and the stars her sisters. Everything created good. This was why Carol was a vegetarian. “I can’t eat anything that has a mother,” she would frequently say. And so she ate fruits, seeds, and grains – because you didn’t have to kill a plant to eat those things. And she was thrilled one day when reading one of the creation stories in Genesis to discover these words: “God said, ‘See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree in its fruit; you shall have *them* for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given *every green plant for food.*” “See,” Carol said. “We’re not supposed to eat each other. I will not eat my brothers and sisters, the birds, the animals, the fish.” Carol had not one, but two statues of St. Francis standing in her gardens amidst her sisters and brothers of the earth. Carol left both these statues to this faith community. One, she said, I could put anywhere . . . the other, however, was to find a place in this worship space – to remind all who come to pray here that all creatures and all living things are children of God – our sisters and our brothers, and that all living things join together in praising God with body, heart, soul, and mind – indeed with their very lives.

Carol, since you have gone, Thursday afternoons are unsettlingly empty. I’m not sure that *I* did much of anything during our afternoons of laughing, crying, praying, gossiping (Carol loved gossip!), meditating, and you planning. But you did much more than I. Carol, on those Thursday afternoons, you taught me how to *live* in the midst of dying. You taught me the meaning those words from the hymn we began with: “And whether our tomorrows be filled with good or ill, we’ll triumph through our sorrows and rise to bless God still, to marvel at God’s beauty, and glory in God’s ways.” And Carol, you taught me how to die: you faced death, the end of all your striving, clinging only to the promise you believed with all your heart: that God is good.

Carol, I think I know what I would like to do with my Thursday afternoons now. I should like to come up here, to this sacred space that you so treasured, to this sacred space that was for you a source of peace and strength – and I’ll sit next to your St. Francis and I will wait to hear you, talking with the animals, joined now by Francis and all the saints – dancing and singing with every creature of God in that green, green valley where the Shadow of Death is no more, where there are no more victims, where there is no more suffering – where all is well for ever and ever.

One more thing. Carol said I was to close this homily with a prayer – the prayer of St. Francis. And so to the blessed memory of our sister Carol – until she welcomes each of us in our turn to that green, green valley, until she takes each of us by hand and introduces us to her God. Let us pray.

Lord, make us instruments of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let us sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;

where there is discord, union;

where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;

where there is sadness, joy.

Grant that we may not so much seek

to be consoled as to console;

to be understood as to understand;

to be loved as to love.  
For it is in giving that we receive,  
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,, and  
it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.