

In Celebration of the Life of Rhoda EA Hackler

Before getting into the homily, let me just tell you about one of our hymns - Onward Christian Soldiers. Today is the first time I've allowed that hymn in all of the services I've done over the 15 years of ordained ministry. I don't do war hymns. Rhoda knew that as we sat and talked about putting together this service. I asked her about the hymns and music she'd like, and she said, "I have a favorite but I know you won't do it." I responded, "Rhoda, just tell me - I can't imagine that I would say no." So she said "Onward Christian Soldiers." I just looked at her, stunned. "Oh, Rhoda, you know I don't do war hymns." She looked at me and kind of smiled and didn't say anything. "You're serious, aren't you?" The smile got a little bigger and she nodded her head. "You know you have me over a barrel because you're dying, don't you." The smile got even bigger and she nodded her head. "All right. For you, we'll do Onward Christian Soldiers." And the smile on her face was huge! So we have done that this afternoon. All of the verses. And we did it first so we're done with it!

Now to the homily.

I was talking with Jeffrey and Karin yesterday, making sure our ducks were in order for today's service. Of course, they had such wonderful stories of Rhoda, including the one you just heard from Jeffrey. I think I have never laughed so hard about the happenings surrounding the actual time of death. Actually that was probably the first time I have laughed at a story about the happenings surrounding the actual time of death. It is truly one of the best stories I have ever heard and I fully expect it will make its appearance in at least one sermon over the next couple of years.

A short time later in our conversation, we were talking about what it was like for Alex and Jeffrey and Karen to be with Rhoda in her home as she approached her death. In this day of graduated and assisted care facilities, we often stand by as our friends and relatives are moved to a different wing or another floor as death approaches. Rhoda's family and friends were blessed with the privilege of being with her in her own home as she approached the end of her life. Even in her dying, the daily issues of life continued, the good stuff and the bad stuff, the laughing and the crying, and the intentionality of

saying good bye to the important people in this stage of her life as she prepared to meet others on her journey into the next stage of her life.

Jeffrey's choice of the passage from Ecclesiastes is so appropriate for this service. These statements of contrariness - a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time to be born and a time to die - bring us face to face with the totality of life. So often we don't get to choose those times when we mourn or weep or dance or laugh. So often they happen when we least expect them. But we pray that we have the wisdom to accept them when they do happen - to laugh even at the time of death, to dance even in the midst of our mourning. For an incredibly faithful and dedicated Christian like Rhoda, this wisdom to accept the messiness of life was deep in her DNA. Her deliberate and intentional journey of living into dying - of weeping and laughing through this time - was a great gift of Rhoda's wisdom to those around her. There was no fear in dying. I think that she actually helped those around her walk this journey with her with the same calm and hope that she was experiencing. And I'm sure she was having a wonderful laugh as she watched Jeffrey's best laid plans for her quiet and peaceful death turn into a number one situation comedy.

There were definitely times of tears for Rhoda and her family and friends. Very definitely. But those tears soon gave way to the hope that comes from faith - in Rhoda's life, a very deep and solid foundation of faith in her Creator and in the hope that was promised to her as a child of God. And those tears gave way to a sense of inner peace - the peace that surpasses all understanding, as the apostle Paul tells us.

Rhoda was a Christian; she was an Episcopalian. She was an incredibly bright and talented woman who saw no conflict between her faith and her quest for the truth - whether in history or in art or in music. Her questions about her faith were searching and never ending; her questions continued to help her grow into a deeper relationship with the Source of her life. As an Episcopalian, her relationship with God was in the context of a tradition that insists that we use our ability to reason and question even as we are faced with the mysteries of scripture and tradition. It was Rhoda's faith - her absolute belief in a loving God - that carried her through her life and into and beyond her death. That's one of the assurances we have as Christians - that our lives do not end with death. This is not all there is, to paraphrase an old Peggy Lee song. We know through our faith that

there is life on the other side of death on the cross. That is a crucial understanding for a disciple of Jesus Christ - and God knows Rhoda was a strongly committed disciple.

So we will continue to laugh and cry, to mourn and to dance as we celebrate Rhoda's life. And we wish her Godspeed as she continues her journey into the life-giving light of the one who is her Creator.

Amen.

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July 12, 2008