

Judy Yeakel's funeral Sermon. February 8, 2014. Nigel Taber-Hamilton
Proverbs 8:1, 6-7, 22-31; Psalm 139, Romans 8: 14-19; John 20: 1-18

A few days before Judy died some of the Sophia Singers— that's the group of women you're hearing sing today — came by to sing for her. Judy was, until very recently, a member of the Sophia Singers — oh! how she loved to sing! When they sang that evening she tried to join in, singing even though she couldn't speak. When I heard that story an old Shaker hymn came to mind. Pete Seeger — who died the day before Judy — made it one of his most memorable songs, but so have many others — individuals and choirs:

My life flows on in endless song; Above earth's lamentation, I catch the sweet, though far-off hymn that hails a new creation; Through all the tumult and the strife I hear the music ringing; It finds an echo in my soul—How can I keep from singing?

Judy's story is of that harmonious song of the new creation reverberating in her life.

On Thursday evening I was at a meeting at Seattle University representing our diocese as its Interfaith Officer — we were celebrating Interfaith Harmony Week — something that's sponsored by the United Nations. Next to me was the now-retired Executive Director of the Washington Association of Churches. When he heard I was an Episcopalian he said this: "When I was the Executive Director I worked very closely with someone from your diocese, a wonderful woman — Judy Yeakel — do you know her?"

"Not well enough!" I thought to myself. Her footprint is all over Western Washington, though none of us really know exactly how many things she was behind. Locally she bought a house in Langley — the House of Hope — that houses several non-profits, she was devoted to women's issues, and she deeply cared for the environment. Opera or symphony programs all over the Pacific North West listed her name as donor. Go into myriad buildings on south Whidbey and you'll see her name at the top of the donors list.

She hated that public acknowledgment! When we tried to name this entire building after her she wouldn't let us do it! Same thing happened multiple times elsewhere. Her generosity wasn't self-promoting but the exact opposite: she was happiest when no one knew what she did. She took to heart Matthew 6:1 (this is from The Message): "*Be especially careful when you're trying to be good so that you don't make a performance out of it. It might be good theater, but the God who made you won't be applauding. 2 "When you do something for someone else, don't call attention to yourself."*

Her humble heart never assumed an attitude of privilege. When she was on her way here about a month ago to reserve for her 85th birthday party the parish hall — a good chunk of which she paid for — she wondered out loud "I hope they'll let me use the hall on March 15"!! Are you kidding me?!!

That humble heart was devoted to her Savior and her church. That's "Church" with a small and a large "C". Once she found the Episcopal Church she couldn't conceive of leaving. Once she found St. Augustine's you can be absolutely 100% sure that the only way she was going to leave this place was feet first — "where else would I find a place like this?" she said to me a couple of years ago. That's why her devoted children did everything they could to keep her in her Langley home — where she eventually (and not unhappily) died.

In those last days Judy held court. Not in any regal way — she would have been ticked off if any or us had tried to put her on a pedestal. But those of us privileged to visit her during that time — and there were many of us! — we knew how special those brief moments of communion with her were, for us and for her.

She never gave up on her evangelism. At the end of one visit with someone who hadn't been to church in a couple of years she said: "so when are we going to see you back in church?"! Still singing her song, even toward the end!

What though my joys and comforts die? The Lord my Saviour liveth; What though the darkness gather round? Songs in the night he giveth. No storm can shake my inmost calm While to that refuge clinging; Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, How can I keep from singing?

Judy's obituary - thank you Anne, Barb, Bob, Jim, for that! – said this of her: “She was a living example of courage, love, inspiration, generosity, independence and selflessness. An enthusiastic leader in her community and church, everyone who knew Judy was touched by her beautiful spirit.”

Of her, her beloved friend and our founding rector, Bill Burnett (the 1st anniversary of whose death we just celebrated a few days ago), said this: “*The beauty of how Judy functions is that although she's an extremely capable person, she's quiet and unassuming, never wanting the glory for herself. She's a wonderful example for people to look up to*”.

Judy was always meticulous, always very well-prepared and organized. She knew what she wanted – though she didn't always get it. As a child, for instance, her fondest dream for when she grew up was to play for the Green Bay Packers!

She lived by this motto: “*If you don't like it, change it; if you can't change it, don't worry about it!*” She couldn't, for instance change the Creed, of which she was not overly fond! So she didn't let it worry her – though you'll notice it's absence from this service, which is by no means accidental!

There were other things she could change, she believed, so she set out to change them. One of them was about the role of women in the Church and especially how women are understood in the Bible.

With few exceptions the Bible is a masculine document, offering a masculine perspective, and seeing men as the main players in the story of faith. Judy recognized how remarkable the women mentioned in the biblical stories must have been, simply because in such a masculine story they're even mentioned! So she wrote a book: “Sister, tell us your story”. It's no accident that she focused in particular on the woman who anoints Jesus in the Gospel of Mark – she mentioned her on the book's back cover, and then opened with her story in the book itself.

For St. Mark, all the men in the story – all of Jesus' male disciples – are examples of failure, with Judas being different only in the spectacular nature of his own failure. Only one person gets it, and that's the woman who anoints Jesus – Matthew's account has led to her being called “The Woman with the alabaster jar.” But Mark's recording of this story is the most revealing; he'd figured out exactly how profoundly and accurately this woman really got what being a disciple meant, such that Mark's Jesus said this of her: “I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.” (Mark 14:9). For Mark's Jesus this woman *is* the epitome of discipleship for all who would follow him. You can see why Judy began with her story.

I doubt it occurred to Judy that we'd share her book with all of you – but we have lots of copies for you. We'd like you to have them. And if you want to throw a few dollars in the basket, we'll give it to Helping Hand of South Whidbey, one of those non-profits in the House of Hope.

Judy chose the readings for today for the same reason she wrote her book – she wanted – wants – you to hear the untold story behind the familiar story of Jesus.

WISDOM: in the reading from Proverbs Wisdom – Sophia – is personified as feminine. Sophia speaks of noble things, speaks truth. “When [God] established the heavens, I, [Sophia-Wisdom], I was there”. Judy was fascinated when I told her about a book by biblical scholar Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre titled “Jesus among her children” – the “her” in the title being Sophia-Wisdom. Johnson-DeBaufre suggests that Christianity has embraced a Jesus-centered

perspective of our faith that's overly shaped our interpretation of significant parts of the Synoptic Gospels, when we should place an interest in *the community that shaped Jesus* at the center of inquiry. Men focus much more on individuals than women; women focus more on a communitarian perspective, she says. This was, as they say, right up Judy's street!

Psalm 139 makes explicit the experience of many believers – Jews, Christians and Muslims – that the desire of God for relationship with us is anything but passive, such that the metaphor most often used for God in this psalm is “the Hound of Heaven”. Judy felt the power of the opening verses in particular: “Lord you have searched me out and known me; you know my sitting down and my rising up; you discern my thoughts from afar.”

ROMANS: Sophia returns for us in Paul's profound words to the Roman believers: the Spirit bearing witness that “we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.” (Rom 8:16-17)

JOHN: But the grandest of all is saved to the last! The magical vision of encounter between Mary Magdalene and the risen Jesus. When you add some of the Nag Hammadi gospels to the four canonical gospels an interesting picture of Mary Magdalene emerges. There was clearly a struggle in the early church over who should be identified as the leader of the community in the absence of Jesus.

- Luke sees a struggle between Mary Magdalene and Peter, with Peter coming out on top.
- John sees a struggle between Peter, and the Beloved Disciple, with the latter being the clear favorite, though Mary gets to be in that struggle, too.
- In the Gospel of Mary it's Mary who is the leader of the disciples.

Remember, again, that for any woman simply to be mentioned in such a patriarchal culture, and especially doing things women weren't supposed to or allowed to do, **speaks to exactly how remarkable they were**. And here is a woman that – in all of the men's gospels – is seen as a leader, perhaps as THE leader, after Jesus. What a person the Magdalene must have been!

And there's another reason why this story was so appealing to Judy. That it recounts the first resurrection appearance being to a woman – to Mary. That's a profound statement. And it's made more so by the fact that, in all the other recountings of that first dramatic appearance it's women who are front and center. I'm pretty darned positive that Judy chose this passage for exactly these two reasons: that it talks about the transformative experience of resurrection, and that it states exactly how central, equal, and important women were in the first community of Christianity.

We lost that view for nearly 2,000 years. It wasn't lost on Judy. *“If you don't like it, change it;”* In her gentle, quiet, subtle, inexorable way, Judy is telling all of us to pay attention to these truths simply by her selection of these readings.

It's the last message she knew she could share with us, so she wanted it to count. If we are to honor her, the very least we can do is to make this message count, this message of divinely-inspired equality. In the words of folk singer Pat Humphries, “The rising of women means the rising of us all”.

So here we are, at the end of it all – at least in this life. Every song has a final chorus. Death comes to all of us just as it came to Judy on January 28th. The final verse of her song of life was sung that evening. I'm pretty sure she was singing it as she went, and I can't think of anything better for her to be singing than this last verse of the Shaker hymn:

I lift my eyes; the cloud grows thin; I see the blue above it; And day by day this pathway smooths, Since first I learned to love it; The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart, A fountain ever springing; All things are mine since I am his— How can I keep from singing?

May she rest in peace and rise in glory – singing all the way! Amen.