

Celebration of Life and Funeral Rite with Holy Eucharist for William Melbourne Burnett
January 30, 2013 Nigel J. Taber-Hamilton

If Bill were standing here at this moment, he'd have his trademark grin on his face, and two words on his lips: The first would be "Wow!", and the second, "Welcome"! Two good words for this day! Wow; welcome!

This is a special moment for all of us; a special moment and an important opportunity for our own learning. A young woman greets a visitor in a parking lot, and escorts him a mile or so to his new place – an 'A'-framed church with an itsy-bitsy extra space attached that's more like a parish room than a parish hall! That moment was forty-four years ago, but it could have been yesterday.....Looking at the pictures in Campbell Hall that go back to that day and before I'm reminded that it's in moments like this that we recognize the passage of time, and realize we're all growing (and some of us have grown) older together; that since Bill first came here, *infants* have become *young adults* and entered middle age, and young adults have become middle-aged adults and then have become, like me, perfect.....well, older!

Looking at the pictures of Bill that are all over Campbell Hall – of a young adult getting ready to make a grand trip around the USA, or a mature priest overseeing an organ fund-raising campaign, or his in-retirement directory photo – looking at those pictures I'm reminded of how quickly our lives fly by, and how important it is both to stop and mark special events on the journey, and also to be intentional in living in the moment, for that moment will never come again.

Stop, and smell the roses.

This is a place to do that, to stop, and smell the roses (or, in our case, the Rhodies!). Whidbey Island, and this part of it, this sacred space, they're thin places, places to encounter the Holy, and to do so in fellowship with other, like-minded believers. This place wove it's spell on Bill! And he responded with grace-filled gratitude.

So, today, we're gathering to celebrate this place, and this man, and how the interaction of the two created something special.

I want you to know that the readings for this service are Bill's three most favorite scripture passages! He didn't actually *specifically* choose them though! He left very explicit instructions about what hymns we were to sing, and what I was supposed to say in this sermon – "No Eulogies", he said, meaning – gentle, humble soul that he was – meaning he didn't want this moment to be about him. Well, good luck with that one, Bill! I'd say the chances of us not wanting to talk about Bill today are somewhere between slim and none!

Bill left very explicit instructions about a lot of things, but no direction about the readings. So I asked Joan Johnson, who's known him for over 40 years, about his favorite biblical passages, and she laughed, and said something like this: "In our family we all remember that he'd begin his sermon with "this is my favorite scripture passage" nearly every Sunday!" So when it came to the choice of the readings, how could I go wrong?!

Well, those of you who know me are more than aware that there's always that possibility! Because there are some passages Bill wouldn't have wanted. For instance, he would never have said that some of the more gory or grizzly passages in, say, the Book of Joshua – the ones that spoke of ancient “ethnic cleansing” – were his “favorite passages”. Just like he wouldn't have said that certain hymns in the hymnal were his favorite hymns. I once jested that I was impressed he wanted #562 at his funeral (“Onward, Christian Soldiers....”!). I think it's fair to say Bill would never have said he hated that hymn – he was of the “if you can't be kind, be quiet” school. Which is probably why he didn't grace me with a verbal response, though his look spoke volumes!

Bill's feelings for #562 were common knowledge in this place, which explains how, on one of the Sundays just before he retired, he was given a Sunday bulletin filled with his favorite hymns. It was the only bulletin like that in this place on that day, meaning that everyone else had a quite different one! Imagine his surprise when the first hymn wasn't in his bulletin. You can guess which one it was! “Onward, Christian Soldiers....”! And the hymn selection – in Bill's eyes, anyway – went downhill from there.

That such a prank was both possible, and enjoyed, not just by this congregation gathered in worship, but also by Bill, and, I have no doubt, by God, speaks to who Bill was, and what sort of community he had helped to mold in this place.

We are who we are today, because of who and how Bill was here for nearly forty-three years. His fingerprints are everywhere. Not, of course, that he got his way over everything. When this new space was built he really wanted one thing that didn't happen, and still hasn't. So perhaps we should do it in his memory? What's that you say? “What was it?”. Why chairs, not pews, of course! And I want you to know I have no investment in this at all!

One of Bill's favorite hymns (and I suspect that “favorite hymns” were as unlimited as “favorite scripture”) was #304 “I come with joy to greet my Lord, forgiven, loved, and free” – he loved it, in part, he said to me, because it was for him a metaphor for what was going to happen to him when he died: he would, he knew, be joyful, because he was going to meet his Lord – who is your Lord and mine – knowing that he was already forgiven, had always been loved, and would be, now and forever, free, in all the ways that we as human beings can be free.

In the end, what troubled him most about the forgetting wasn't so much forgetting who he was (though that did trouble him), but forgetting that he loved his Lord with all his heart, and soul, and mind, and his neighbor – including you and me – as himself. Bill loved scripture and hymns because Bill loved the God we encounter in scripture and in our hymns, and the community that scripture and those hymns help to create.

Forgetting – in the way that Bill (and so many others) forget, is a contemporary curse of living so long. Part of being a community of faith is that we have committed ourselves – as a community – to remembering for each other who we are and who we follow; when Bill could no longer remember, we remembered for him, as we do today.

Here's something I remember: a conversation with Pat Hoelting in 2001 about Bill. She shared how, as a vestry member, she remembered that he began a 1997 vestry meeting by saying that "I have an announcement to make." And she thought to herself, "O good! He's going to tell us he's gay, which we all know anyway, and we can move on without that secret getting in the way." Instead Bill said "I'm retiring"! But the point about Pat's expectation, and Bill's reality, is important.

Bill came from that generation who knew exactly what it was like to be discriminated against because of one's sexual orientation. You guarded that piece of information very carefully - casual revelations could lead to social ostracism, to loss of a job, or to beatings or - as in the case of Episcopalian Matthew Shepard in Wyoming in 1998 - death. And let's not pretend that all that's gone away, either. In so many different ways social oppression is still with us - which is why Bill was fond, he once told me, of Ted Kennedy's famous speech at the 1980 Democratic Convention, which ended with these words: "For all those whose cares have been our concern, the work goes on, the cause endures, the hope still lives, and the dream shall never die."

Bill's experience of discrimination provides a backdrop for his life, and to that life-long commitment to the work of social justice so eloquently stated in Kennedy's speech - when you've been on the butt-end of others' bigotry you also know how much of a gift it is when someone reaches out with love and compassion. That's part of "The Story Of Bill".

On our first Sunday morning lived in the sure and certain reality that we would, forever after be living without Bill - January 20th - we also shared in a moment that would have brought Bill to tears of joy. As I remember Bill in the days and years to come I will always remember that - on that day - we gathered as a community around a table in Campbell Hall to cut a cake with the good Archbishop at its center to celebrate the weddings of two men and two women, and that we did so not in secret, or with qualification, or with doubt, but simply, joyfully, and with a sense that this was entirely right, and proper, and appropriate, and good: that we did it "in the sight of God and the face of this congregation".

If, on that day, there was one regret, it was that Bill was finally not present to share in that moment.

And yet, on a profound level, we all know that he *was* present; that he - and all the cloud of witnesses who have gone before us from this community - that they all surround us now, standing around the walls of this place, and that on their faces is not sorrow but joy, not sadness but celebration, not a sense of loss but broad grins that so many people would come together to celebrate this particular saint of God, Bill Burnett, who was so much the symbol of who we are here as a community of faith.

We sang the first hymn because it seemed to me that what Marty Haugen speaks of almost exactly echoes who Bill was and what he was dedicated to in his time here: building a community of love and grace; where the central acts of worship - baptism and eucharist - "water, wine, and wheat" in Haugen's words, are celebrated in this banquet hall on holy ground; the "holy ground" not just of this "thin place", this sacred island, this holy site, but also on the

holy ground of our lives.

Bill was a person of faith committed to “heal and strengthen, serve and teach, and live the word [he’d] known.” And that’s what he did throughout his years here. This is a place that’s “[b]uilt on tears and cries and laughter, [on] prayers of faith and songs of praise.”

And this is a place built on Bill’s own previous experience – as a gay man – of exclusion and discrimination. Out of that experience was born, for him, a profound commitment to working for love, justice and inclusion. We are who we are because no matter our political persuasion we understand the language of love, and justice, and inclusion; we understand it because we have seen in Bill a commitment to it, and the need for it, lived out before our eyes. Truly, for Bill, a core value for St. Augustine’s was and is and remains this: “All Are Welcome in this place”.

So if we really want to honor Bill, then the last words of that first hymn (“h-y-m-n”) are the last words we should ever need to utter about this him (“h-i-m”), as a summation of his hopes for us as he journeys into the future that is God’s undiscovered country: “Let this house proclaim from floor to rafter, all are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.”