

Homily preached at the Requiem Mass for Sylvia Linde-Guback
St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Northport Michigan, September 15, 2018

My sisters and brothers in Christ, family, friends:

Sylvia is delivered from her adversity. And it's okay to say the words die, died, death. It's okay to use those words. It's okay to say Sylvia has died. Because that is what has happened. We don't need to shield ourselves from it. She has not passed. She is not lost. We all know where to find her. Those words have no sacred content. But die has – it's what our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ did. He died on the cross, and we know what happened after that. It should not be so hard for us to talk about death, and the life that comes after death – when at the resurrection all will be like angels in heaven, Jesus said.

We conquer death – as Christ did. And so we try to dignify and deify our words, to put sacred character into our language about a major life event: death.

Sylvia never saw her long illness as a *battle* against cancer. She was a pacifist and a Christian, and so that term did not fit what she was going through. Nor did Christ speak of his travail as a battle when he was on the threshold of crucifixion – the excruciating painful death. I assure you that Sylvia never used the words fight, battle, struggle. They were not in her vocabulary. She used the word “test.” The disease was a test, a potential obstacle to her maintaining faith in the face of – not great odds – in the face of an inevitable ending. Here was a disease that tried to pull her away from her faith. And she passed that test. She maintained her faith, she maintained her bearing against the inevitable. She knew that steadfast faith could never cave in against whatever cancer threw at her – and it was so much. She knew that her faith in God, faith in her redeemer, would guide her, comfort her, strengthen her, sustain her in the worst moments, in the darkest hours, in the most terrible days imaginable. Her faith never faltered – and that's what gave her the power to withstand for months, and years.

Some might say: Why me? Sylvia's answer? She might say: Why not me – because I can keep my faith in the face of suffering. Cancer: you cannot beat me down, even in death. You cannot beat me down because I am not yours. I am God's. You can crush my body, but you cannot crush my soul. Indeed, her body was diseased, broken, contorted, scarred – but her soul was brilliantly alive with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Before she went to sleep each night, she always said: “Alleluia, thank God for another day.” She could just as easily have recited words from Deuteronomy (30:19-20), as God had spoken to Moses, and then Moses to the people: “I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days....” Sylvia often kept and marked the bulletin inserts with the readings for Sunday: I found one from July 3, 2016: Psalm 30. “I will exalt you, O Lord, because you have lifted me up and have not let my enemies triumph over me.”

She never feared the morrow. She discovered that cancer is not a deadly affliction. It is an opportunity for ministry, for speaking out with deeds, and with song. She exposed the unknown and the feared, and held to life. This brings to mind the story in Luke's Gospel about the man Simeon. The Holy Spirit told him he would not die until he had seen the

Messiah. Simeon went into the temple, saw the infant Jesus, and praised God, saying: “Lord, you now have set your servant free, to go in peace as you have promised.” Indeed, Sylvia was set free. She went in peace. And she knew where she wanted to go.

On the day before she died, it was a Saturday like today, she was still somewhat lucid. I anointed her with holy oil, I read the prayers, and then we shared Holy Communion. I did not know at that moment: the tiny sliver of sacred wafer and the smallest drop of wine would be the last earthly food she would ever have. But that was all she needed for the journey. A little later, she said to me, very clearly: “take me to sanctuary, push me (she had been using a wheel chair for more than a week, when she was not in bed), push me, come help me, help me up, take me to sanctuary.” No fears, she never doubted where she was to go. She was on her way, then, at that moment to the sacred place where there is no pain or sorrow – just life everlasting. She had the gift of faith – and she has given us a gift: her example.

Sylvia loved music. It was while we were at seminary: she realized that her voice was a sacred gift – and she decided to use that gift to sing only sacred music. No wonder that she marked up and saved bulletin inserts from our Sunday worship here: Psalm 30: “sing to the Lord, you servants of his; give thanks for the remembrance of his holiness... Therefore my heart sings to you without ceasing; O Lord my God, I will give you thanks for ever.” Psalm 104: “I will sing to the Lord as long as I live; I will praise my God while I have my being.... I will rejoice in the Lord. Bless the Lord, O my soul. Hallelujah!” No wonder that the processional and recessional hymns she chose for this Requiem Mass are effusive and resplendent with Alleluias. While we feel sad, this is no time to mourn – we share with her the joy of everlasting life.

Throughout that final Saturday night and into the small hours of Sunday morning, July 15, (how fitting, a Sunday morning) her sounds became incoherent. I couldn't pick out a single word. Yet she went on and on. As I listened in the darkness, I came to realize that the sounds Sylvia was making had phrasing, intonation, dynamics. She was singing! But what? A Swedish hymn? It took me a few seconds – I thought, it had to be this: she was singing the soprano line in the chorus of her favorite choral work: the Verdi *Requiem*. She knew it by heart. She was singing her way home. After that revelation, everything made sense. It's not seeing is believing – it's the other way around: believing is seeing. You believe and you understand. You believe and the world is made new. You believe and existence takes on new form and meaning. And we believe that there is a resurrection – not in the worldly sense, but in the sacred ethereal sense.

Shortly after sunrise, Sylvia died. You know, music is not just the notes – it's also the space, the rest between the notes. And she is at rest. It was a death with dignity, spirit, love, and music. May God bestow upon us such great spiritual wealth so that, at the last moment, our souls will be replete with faith and never be found wanting. ❀