

A Homily for Hilary

Offered at the Celebration of the Life of Hilary Hopkins

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Let me start by saying: Yes, Hilary asked for a homily, too! “Please,” she said in a long document that expressed her wishes for today, “a few words on the theme of many mansions, many ways of reverence and worship and taking joy in the creation and the gift of life.” And yet what comes to mind as I consider these themes and Hilary is not a few words... or any words really... but instead a sense of spaciousness and one that holds a mystery beyond words!

I’ve come to wonder if words are what prevented Hilary from being a believer. Words for God. Words for belief. I wonder if words, much as she loved them and could craft them so beautifully, too often got in the way for her when it came to something as numinous, luminous, shimmering, and mysterious as what religion aspires to describe! Yes, she could translate palpably, and powerfully, as we see in her versions of Psalm 23 and the Lord’s Prayer. Yes, she was moved by spiritual metaphors, as “in my Father’s house there are many mansions,” from the scripture from John’s gospel that she chose for her daughter Alyson’s service and included in her instructions for today. Many mansions is a metaphor that I think for her underscored for her a wide and welcoming approach to the wonder and ultimate unknowability of what happens when we die. Yes, she eventually came to say the words of, and join our covenant here at First Church. She became a deeply beloved, committed, and involved member of this faith community and church family. Much to her surprise and ours, she was even the chair of our Christian Formation committee. She led and taught us beautifully, brilliantly, and with passion! All as an atheist, you might ask? Why yes! “Isn’t it marvelous?” Can’t you hear her asking it now? What’s more, isn’t it *mysterious*? Yes, that, too! For who are “we” to *know* all the mansions, all the vast dwelling places and spaces of the divine on earth let alone in heaven. And there’s that spaciousness. If the household of God has room for us all surely it includes atheists, too, right?!

I would tell her sometimes, only occasionally to her feigned chagrin, that despite her being an atheist she was one of the most religious people I knew, and by that I meant the most reverent. She was also one of the most *irreverent* which was the great joys of knowing her! Talk about many rooms to hang out in, and many hats to wear, and swear in (wait for “F hat” in slideshow later). But here, in this place, in this sanctuary, as in the cemetery, as in nature, we saw her gift, and seeming bottomless capacity for reverence, and often with it a deep respect for ancestors and what is ancient, and the more embodied the better!

Believe in “God?” Not Hilary. But give her an invitation to follow Jesus’ age-old example and ritual of love and wash someone’s feet, and have her feet washed as we did right here on many Maundy Thursdays, sometimes with complete strangers? She would do it as if her life depended on it. Hilary was exquisitely present for those moments, and this is just one of those many ways of worship and of reverence and even of taking humble, embodied joy in creation and in receiving and sharing the gift of life.

She's been one of the few members of this community who has ever asked (on several occasions!) for an oil anointing, on her head, while lying at 0 dark hundred in the pre-op rooms at Mt Auburn Hospital, including for her last surgery. In these and other similar sacred moments, it was something about the soothing touch, the capacity to pause, to be fully present to the moment, whether in wonder, fear, horror, jubilation or awe - and *to let life be life!* This gift of hers, this way she received and shared the gift of life, was beyond words! And in troubled times or good, she found great, great comfort in ritual, prayer, music, and of course in nature - in all of the resources she has set out for us today, like a banquet! I even wonder, if she had her druthers and time were no issue, if she wouldn't have made us wash each other's feet today, just to feel how powerful such tenderness and care can be! Or perhaps to anoint each other with an oil. I brought some with me today, the same the I used with her for that last surgery. If any wants a touch later, please come and find me!

For Hilary, it was more than words, more even than faith in action, though she was an exemplar of that, too. How many thousands of postcards sent? How many bags of food pantry items delivered? Through worship, music, nature, moments of sheer presence with her loved ones, Hilary lived so much of her life tapped into those wordless channels through which wonder, reverence, curiosity, gratitude and joy could flow, and through it all she had an almost mystical appetite for embodied ritual, for moments like this, when we can pause and take it all in!

Now, having said all that, allow me to close with a few words she sent me years ago, some time after Alyson died, that capture a bit of both her reverence and irreverence and that seem especially fitting for this occasion. She wrote:

"Dammit, Dan, I really am cheerful MOST OF THE TIME! I am sure you would be surprised to know that! 'cause it seems every time I talk to you I am crying over something. I hate it, ugh. It's just that being in church, at church, no, IN church (different meaning somehow) seems to remove the social controls that boof down (technical term) grief in more "normal" surroundings. Ugh. But I am getting better. Really, I am cheerful most of the time. I laugh a lot, and find interest and even joy in practically everything. Just wanted you to know. Love, Hilary."

Amen? I take these words as an exhortation for us all today! First, and here I'm channeling teacher Hilary: No boofing down today, especially given what is still to come! We are IN church here, so please let the tears flow freely! Second, be cheerful, too, as she most surely was, most of the time. And by all means laugh, and find interest in — awe, wonder and joy in — nearly everything you will see and hear! Even and especially as we are grieving, find that wordless spaciousness, in one of those many mansions or dwelling places that now holds her and that can hold us, too, and together. And let's continue to follow her lead, by every means, taking joy in creation and in the shared gifts of life and love. Amen!