

Homily for Celebration of Life of Steve Steward

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When I talk with people I meet in the community, many of them tell me that the Bible is full of stories of God's anger and they can't find anything good, comforting, hopeful or empowering in it. While everyone is entitled to their own opinion, from all the Bible readings in this service, including the few sentences in John's Gospel we just heard, it is obvious that such an opinion is ill informed. We didn't hear about God being angry, especially in the Gospel. There were no words of hate.

There was grief. A lot of it. The grief of a sister whose brother had died and who took out all her pain and grief on Jesus. It's perhaps a natural reaction when we are in pain to want everyone else to feel it too. And if we had read a few more lines after what we just heard, we would read that Jesus felt that same pain of grief. When he got to his friend, Martha's brother's tomb, he wept.

So far today we have no anger in the Bible, but we do have death, sorrow, grief, and love. So much love. The love of sister and brother. Love of friends. And love of God. Just like we have right here, this morning, as we gather together to carry Steve to the next phase of life. This is the work of love we do as a parish, as friends, and as family.

We do this also because of something else that is here. Because of something else mentioned in the Gospel reading and throughout the prayers and music in this and every church service: because of the hope in the Resurrection of Jesus. Because of the Resurrection, and because we are people of the Resurrection, we believe death – even a death as sudden and unexpected as Steve's – is not the end, it is a change. What is the end of life in this world is the beginning of life in the next world.

Perhaps Steve himself expressed this belief best in one of the ways he liked to tease his sister Amy about her favorite hymn. Of course, to know Steve at all is to know of his deep love for music, including church music. I mentioned earlier that Steve was a choral scholar here at Church of the Good Shepherd when he

was a student at Ohio University. When he started singing with our choir, he fell in love with the Episcopal Church, this parish, and I think everyone here loved him back. Throughout the years Steve grew and deepened his commitment to Christ and to the parish by continuing to sing in the choir, serving in leadership and being one of the most vital contributors to the annual pancake supper as one of the pancake flippers. I know for a fact that he never flipped a bad pancake. Steve was someone we could count on to help when asked.

All of these things are an expression of love; Steve's love of this parish and the people here, our love for him, and God's love for us all. Steve expressed faith in Resurrection life when he would tease Amy – in an encouraging way - about her favorite hymn; an Easter hymn that was the first hymn we sang this morning, *Jesus Christ is Risen Today*. Because we usually only sing it during the Easter season, every year, as Easter approached, Steve would keep telling Amy, "Easter is coming! You'll be singing your favorite hymn soon!"

In his words are the very same hope and belief Martha expressed to Jesus when she said, "I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." Sometimes we might think living that belief means following a discipline of practices like prayer, fasting, attending church. And that is not wrong. It also can show up in everything we do and everything we say, even in the way brothers show love to their sisters, or a friends show love for each other, or a parishioner shows love for a parish community.

We are here today because of that love – a love that is beyond affection, love that is a choice and a reflection of God's love here on earth, and Steve embodied that love in so many ways. He made our lives a little lighter and a little brighter.

When he died so suddenly, it was and still is a shock to us all and it is going to take a long time to walk through the journey of grief that is part of love. Some days this will be easier than others, some days will be incredibly difficult. That is why it is important that we all be gentle with ourselves and gentle with each other. A good friend once described the journey of grief to me this way: Grief is like an enormous boulder that gets dumped in front of you that is impossible to walk around or climb over or dig under. So, wherever you go, you have to push this boulder to get there. At first, this is tremendous work because the grief is new, and the boulder is so large. The only thing we can do is keep pushing the

boulder. It will make us tired, so it's important to rest when you need to. Gradually, slowly, as time goes on, as we keep pushing that boulder, it will get smaller, and smaller, and smaller until it is the size of a pebble. That is when we pick it up and put it in our pocket so we can carry it with us wherever we go. Whenever we need it, whenever we need to remember Steve or feel him with us, we can put a hand in our pocket and feel the comforting smoothness of the pebble.

You see, even though Steve is dead, he is not gone. He will always be with us whenever we sing in church – especially when we sing *Joy to the World* - or have services outside – he loved our outdoor services – or when his family remembers him, when his friends at the library meet, or whenever we flip a perfect pancake, Steve will be there. Because that is how the love of God works. The love we all feel for Steve and Steve feels for us and for God and God feels for us doesn't ever fade or weaken, it remains, and it continues to hold us together. And it is the same love that will carry us when it is our turn to be carried to the next phase of life where death is no more, where there is only resurrection life.