

“Wal-Mart”

*A homily for the people of St. Nicholas
On the occasion of the death of Marge Boccio
25 July 2008*

Isaiah 61:1-3a + 1 Corinthians 15:50-55 + John 11:21-27

It seems like just yesterday that Marge reappeared at St. Nicholas. As she explained later, she left home one Sunday to go to Wal-Mart, but somehow ended up here.

Now I've often heard it said that our building doesn't look much like a church, but Marge was the first person ever to mistake it for Wal-Mart!

Marge had attended St. Nicholas before I arrived in 1995, but had been away for a decade or so. She hadn't cared for the “attitudes” or “politics,” she told me. I understood. Churches can be pretty ghastly places.

But she loved the St. Nicholas she found upon her return, and she in turn was loved by many here. Nothing against Wal-Mart, but Marge came to the right place. Churches can be pretty wonderful, too.

It was not long before she found a special home in the choir, and I was touched by the love and solicitude shown to her by her fellow choristers. That love is evident in the number of them who took off work and rearranged schedules to they could be here to sing many of the hymns Marge most loved.

When Marge returned to St. Nicholas, her cancer was already well along and she became a particular friend of Carmen McCall, another of our parishioners with lung cancer. They were a couple of tough old girls who had no intention of giving up or going quietly. Now that they are together again – Carmen died last October -- I can easily imagine their conversations – and their hugs.

As I've thought about Marge, and the time in life we shared, I've thought a lot about her return to St. Nicholas. I love her story of the car steering her to St. Nicholas instead of Wal-Mart. I love it because it reminds us of something that is so easy to forget. And that is: there is something greater than our ego in all of us, something that, if we let it, will guide us to where we need to be. Call it soul. Call it your gut. Call it God within. Whatever *you* call it, let it lead you.

Marge's ego may have thought she needed shampoo or paper towels, a carton of milk or a box of snacks that morning, but her soul knew it needed its own nourishment. And it led Marge where she needed to go.

At St. Nicholas, she found ways to grapple with her suffering and her impending death; she found laughter and community; but most of all, she found ways to serve and touch the lives of others.

St. Nicholas is where she found what she needed. I am sure Marge would say to each of you that the next time you set out for Wal-Mart, listen to your soul and see where it wants to go. Maybe it's a church or synagogue. Maybe it's somewhere completely different that has nothing to do with institutional religion.

Pay attention to that still, small voice inside you – or let those hands turn your steering wheel – and you will get you where you need to go.

Finally, Marge gave careful thought to this memorial liturgy, choosing most of the music and readings. I hope you paid good attention to the readings she chose and I hope the music that touched her soul will also touch yours.

There is much I could say about the readings and music – that’s one of the things we priests tend to do endlessly, talk about scripture -- and about the significance of Marge’s emphatic instruction that today’s liturgy *must* include a celebration of the Eucharist, but I’ll confine myself to two concluding remarks.

The first is to invite all of you who would like to do so to receive communion here today. The Episcopal Church is an open communion church, but even if it were not, I would invite you. For if we cannot recognize and enjoy our connection and communion with one another when we gather to bid farewell to a loved one, then we probably have no business ever celebrating Eucharist.

The Eucharist is the great sacrament of Oneness – oneness among the living, oneness with the dead, oneness with those who will come after us, and oneness with the living God.

Second, I want to end with a few words about Marge’s choice of Isaiah 61 as our first reading. It’s the same reading her friend Carmen chose for her memorial liturgy.

Because it speaks of comforting all who mourn, this passage is a natural choice for funerals. But that’s not all it does. It speaks, too, of an active, hands-on faith, the kind of faith that Carmen and Marge both lived. Listen again:

The Lord has anointed me;

has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,

to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives,

and release to the prisoners.

This, my friends, is how Marge sought to live the last years of her life. She did not turn inward or come to church for solace only. She came to participate and to make a difference in the lives of others. Even as her strength ebbed, she remained outwardly focused and participated as fully as she possibly could in ministries of compassion and care. What an example!

And so I think her final message to us is contained in this reading – and it is a radical challenge: bring good news, bind up, proclaim liberty. If you answer her challenge, there's no telling where you'll end up.

But it probably won't be Wal-Mart.