

The Rev. Anne S. Howard

John 11:17-27

Stefani wanted us to hear this story about Martha and Jesus and Lazarus for her funeral. Just two days before she died, Stefani told me she chose this story for her funeral at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, but that I could choose something else for today at Trinity. She said she picked it because it featured a woman's voice.

I told her that this story was my first pick, but for different reasons: it features a woman alright, but a particular kind of woman: strong, feisty, courageous Martha—somebody just like Stefani. I told her I thought it was also a good choice because Martha is angry in this moment, and she's not afraid to speak up about it. She is pissed off at Jesus and God and the universe, because she's lost her beloved brother Lazarus, way too soon. I told Stefani, "I'm pissed too—we're losing you, way too soon."

And she nodded and almost smiled and whispered "good reasons."

So here we are. And I feel like Martha. Don't we all?

"Lord, if you had been here, Stefani would not have died."

I feel Martha's anger, and Jesus' grief. When he came to the grave of Lazarus, this story goes on to say in two short words: 'Jesus wept.' I believe that God, the great heart of the universe, has been weeping, with Joe and Stefani, with Iva, with all of us throughout this past year of struggle.

And, like Martha, and like Stefani, and Heather, I also believe something else, something beyond all the grief of this moment. Several of you have heard me say this:

I believe, with the most foundational premise of this whole Christian business, that God joins us in human form. Just as God showed up for Martha and Mary and Lazarus in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, God continues to come into our midst—to reveal divinity—through a great variety of human lives. Each one of us carries a bit of that divinity, the light of God, and in some lives that light shines clear and strong.

Such a life and such a light was Stefani's. She revealed something of God to us.

First, of course, joy. Stefani showed us **joy**, vibrant, radiant joy. Tielhard said, "Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God." From her deep throaty chuckle to her wide open embrace of the world around her, Stefani was filled up and overflowing with that joy. She didn't really talk about it, she just exuded it. When she led worship, she filled the whole church with light and joy. She was enthused—en theos—filled with God. Stefani revealed to us the joy of God.

In her wide embrace of the world, and each one of us, Stefani revealed to us the extravagant **hospitality** of God. She wanted the church doors to be flung wide open to welcome anyone and everyone to this table, and she worked to bring that welcome out into any community she served. She welcomed each and every one of us into her big heart. Stefani revealed to us the wide welcome of God.

Stefani showed us God's dream of **justice**. Her joy—so much more than mere happiness—came from a deep wellspring of compassion. She was keenly aware of the sorrow and alienation and poverty and injustice that the world and the forces of oppression serve up to all God's children, and so she met all that with strong, open arms to embrace the suffering and work for justice, inclusion and equality. Stefani revealed to us God's dream of justice.

Strong and feisty like Martha, Stefani showed us the **strength** of God. Just as Martha demanded of Jesus that he live up to his full identity as a giver of life, Stefani demanded that of herself. And she called upon all of us to do the same, to live into who we are as beloved children of God. She dove into her life, and her work, with guts and gusto. A challenge was not daunting; it was an invitation to discover a new way. And these past 14 months, throughout her diagnosis and struggle with cancer—well, have you ever seen anyone so strong, so hopeful, so willing to try and try and try again? Stefani revealed to us the strength of God.

In this last long year, as she met each challenge and hope and disappointment and grief, Stefani—with Joe and Iva—showed us the **grace** of God. She transformed each hospital and clinic and ward, every doctor and

nurse and tech, with her good cheer and generosity of spirit. She honored her caregivers for their skill, and was grateful for every effort made on her behalf. And what a team they made, Joe and Stefani and Iva—at each turn, they found some way to give thanks, to celebrate each other and the community of care that grew around them. Pure grace. Stefani, with Joe and Iva, revealed to us the extravagant grace of God.

And love. Oh, did Stefani show us the **love** of God. Through all of her years, she showed that love to each one of us in a particular way, but I am thinking of the remarkable love story of Stefani and Joe. I have not seen another couple more delighted with each other, and with the discovery of shared and growing love, day in and day out, year after year. We saw it when they met each other and when they married 14 years ago. Every day since, they've traveled a journey of mutual discovery, devoted to understanding and appreciating and knowing one another. And in this past year, through their chronicle on Caring Bridge, we have all been witnesses to their love story. Never have I seen a story of such passionate, expansive, transformative love. We have seen a love that has the power to bring the dawn. Stefani, with her beloved Joe, revealed to us the limitless, unending, abiding love of God.

Lastly, Stefani showed us the **faithfulness** of God, a faith that faces into the future and sees life come from death.

Some years back, I interviewed Stefani about the beatitudes—those sayings of Jesus – ‘Blessed are the poor...the meek...the peacemakers.’ She chose to talk about ‘Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted.’ I thought it ironic that Stefani –whose middle name could be joy—would focus on mourning. But she was working at the time in a parish in Manchester, England, where the factories had closed and the jobs gone away. She did more funerals than baptisms or weddings in her working-class parish. She told me about the daily sorrow and struggle of the people she cared for.

She said:

“You know, at the opening of every funeral, I stand up and I look into the eyes of the people that are there and I say: ‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted’. And you know something? I say it with conviction that it’s the truth. I believe it.”

“Manchester—this social location, these people—has burned upon my heart something that I’ll always be able to translate to any place I serve: It’s a Good Friday world we live in. But God will be there in the mourning and in the comforting. It’s this Good Friday God that I see every day that makes me value and be able to preach Easter morning.”

In her faith in Easter, a faith that held even through her darkest days approaching death, through all the Good Fridays she endured, Stefani shared Martha’s bold faith that life comes out of death. Stefani revealed to us the faithfulness of God.

So here we are. And I believe that Stefani, in her new life, is showing us something new. She shows us that love is stronger than death, that life comes from death. She shows us Easter. Stefani, now, *is* Easter.

Amen.