

Sermon preached at the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul, Marietta, GA
At the Burial of Winsome Hawkins; 4/4/41 – 11/29/18
by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey, December 15, 2018
(Isaiah 61:1-3; Revelation 21:1-7; John 14:1-6)

Isaiah 61:1-3 (NRSV): The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he 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; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion-- to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.

Revelation 21:1-7: Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children.

John 14:1-6: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Jesus said “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.” Winsome chose these passages of scripture when she planned her funeral. They are words of comfort and words of hope, a vision far greater than what we can see today. Today, our hearts are full of sadness and of celebration. There are many things about Winsome so powerful and so enduring that even as we grieve her absence, we cannot help but celebrate her presence with us.

Winsome gave generously to community organizations, making a difference in the lives of many, and serving with distinction in various leadership roles. She did not have a loud personality, and yet so many people knew her and grew from her influence, her leadership, her wisdom as a mentor, and her example, especially for many young women. Most of all, she loved her family. She was devoted to you, Neville, and she gave so much love and wisdom and joy to her daughters and granddaughter. She was a rock, a mentor, and a source of love and joy.

Winsome had such grounding, such firmness of purpose and clarity of wisdom. She also had this wonderful smile and laughter that showed a more joyous and adventurous side. She and her family loved to travel, and from what her daughters told me, she was fearless in her adventures. I know you don't need me to tell you how much God blessed you with a wonderful wife, sister, mother, grandmother, aunt, cousin, friend. She leaves you with a legacy that did not go away when she died. The blessings that God gave to you through her continue to form and shape who you are. Even now, I suspect, each of you are passing on to others the same kindness and

wisdom, the same adventure and resiliency that she taught you. So others may be blessed by her legacy, the way you were blessed.

Winsome loved to garden. She loved to see beauty in flowers and trees and plants. She had the discipline of order and care and preparation, but she also knew how to let things grow and flourish in their own right—to bring out their own beauty. She did this with people and she did this with gardens, including the Memorial Garden in which her ashes will be interred.

Winsome was such a gift to us here at St. Peter & St. Paul. She helped plan a renovation of the Memorial Garden and she organized the effort to sustain that work for the future. She served as a Eucharistic Visitor, bringing Holy Communion to the sick or shut-in from the parish.

Every year, about late August or early September, I would call Winsome. The conversation would go like this: “Hello, Winsome. This is my annual call to encourage you to run for the vestry.” The vestry is the board of elected lay leaders in the church. She said to me “Father Tom, I don’t know why you want me on the vestry.” And I would say “Winsome! You love the Lord so much! You have such reverence for Holy Scriptures. You have such depth of prayer and a long-established practice of discerning and following God’s will. You hold together justice and mercy. You are just the good and Godly person that a vestry needs in its ministry!”

Alas, she always said no. But I believe that she kept us in her prayers, and I believe that God heard those prayers and that we’ve been blessed through them. You don’t need to be a vestry member to be a leader in the church, and Winsome Hawkins demonstrated that clearly. She led by who she was, and who she is in Christ will continue to lead in the church as her memory and influence calls forth more of her brothers and sisters in Christ to prayer and study and service.

One of the most enduring memories for many of us will be hearing Winsome read Holy Scriptures for our worship services. There are many of us here today who are sad that at our funerals we will not have Winsome reading scripture. It isn’t just that elegant Jamaican accent, or the dignity and bearing with which she stood. She read with that strength of character, that clarity of purpose that she showed in the rest of her life. Her depth of commitment to this task was so evident that one cannot describe her duties as simply “reading scripture” but it was rather “proclaiming scripture.”

She read and studied the passage. She sought to understand it and its context. She practiced the passage at home and from the lectern Bible. She sought to interpret it with her voice. She brought reverence and delight to her reading. Can’t you still hear her reading the beginning of Genesis or the dry bones passage from Ezekiel, or even the prophecies that we heard this morning from Isaiah and Revelation? Can’t you just hear her saying “The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news...”

She read with such care and preparation, such prayerful devotion. She was such a powerful witness to Jesus Christ, bringing us Jesus’ Good News. For she knew and showed that the word of God is living and active; that it does not return to God empty, but it accomplishes that for which God purposes.¹

¹ Hebrews 4:12; Isaiah 55:11

We are here to celebrate Winsome's life and the gift she still is for us. We are also here to grieve, because we will miss her so much. Just as Jesus wept for his friend Lazarus when he died, so we also weep. Our tears are fitting for one we love so much and one who blessed us so much. So we grieve her loss. But we do not grieve as those without hope. We grieve as those whose hope is in the resurrection from the dead through Jesus Christ our Lord. Because Jesus is raised, so Winsome will be raised. Because Christ is alive, he gives life to us and to Winsome that will never die.

Winsome knows and loves the Lord who gave her a vision in her life like that vision from Revelation that we heard this morning. A vision of a new heaven and a new earth, where God will dwell with us, where death will be no more, where God will wipe away our tears, where sorrow and pain will be no more, for the first things are passed away—and behold! God will make all things new! To the thirsty, God gives water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. Winsome drank deeply from that spring, and God gave her such life that she shared it abundantly with others.

So I call you to pursue that same faith, that same hope, that same joy that she knew. Seek out God and find God. Listen for Jesus and you will hear his voice as Winsome did. In so doing, you will share with others the foundation that made Winsome such a blessing to the world.

This is the hope in which Winsome lived. This is the hope in which Winsome died. This is the hope in which we live, embracing Jesus who gives us life, and who gave her life—a life that is truly life—a life that will never die.

So, in the assurance of eternal life given at Baptism, let us proclaim our faith and say the apostles' creed.