

A Sermon for the Service in Thanksgiving for the Life of  
William Bartholomew Daniels  
at St. John's Church, Norwood Parish  
14 June 2005

Readings: Lamentations 3:22-26;31-33; Psalm 121; Romans 8:14-19,34-35,37-39;  
John 14:1-6a,27

The apostle Thomas was sad and angry with Jesus, and if we were to read on, the apostle Philip also took Jesus to task; neither wanted to hear any fine words from Jesus about how things would work out after his death, his departure from them. So Jesus will understand not only our sorrow but any anger we might have about being here today. To tell the truth, we would rather not be here today; we would much rather that Bart were well, and whole, fulfilling his heart's desire -- being of service to others and to God. And we may not be ready, you and I, still in our tears, to hear any fine words from me assuring us that in fact Bart is now well and whole, and fulfilling his heart's desire -- being of service to others and to God.

In this service of thanksgiving for the life of William Bartholomew Daniels, we give thanks for his abiding trust in God. We give thanks for the grace which sustained him through the significant losses and challenges of his life. Those losses and challenges were many: The death of his mother when he was only twelve, the challenge of alcoholism in his father's life -- a challenge Bart confronted and met by the grace of God in his own, his struggle with chronic depression, the important relationships that didn't work out as he had hoped, the paralysis and intractable pain following the removal of the spinal tumor, the wounds and the recurring infections, and then the brain cancer that so compromised him these last two and one-half years eventually ending his life. Yet through all of these losses many of you have remarked that Bart never blamed God; never asked, Why me? Bart did not think himself willingly afflicted and grieved by God. Some of us, I think, did that for him; but Bart's questions of God were more about what God could want of him, about God's purposes, how could his losses be redeemed for God's service? Such an inspiring ministry from his own weakness and brokenness: a witness to the compassion of God which bore Bart up and through his losses as on eagle's wings. His compelling witness drew not only his friends back to his bedside, but his professional caregivers, as well.

When I first came to St. John's almost ten years ago, Bart was volunteering with the Bethesda-Chevy Chase Rescue Squad and as a lay chaplain at Suburban Hospital. In the parish he served as a Lay Eucharistic Minister -- reading

scripture, leading prayers and bearing the chalice; he remained active in that ministry even after his paralysis, not only serving in the Chapel but here in the Nave, and helpfully coming to meetings from which he could have been readily excused. He had helped out with the Youth Group from time to time, and the Group thought he was great! When our longtime Youth Minister was away on an adventure for some months, I was talking to the Group about adult support for them. They wanted Bart! We didn't have the elevator yet, and Bart was still in physical therapy and not as strong as he would become -- so that didn't happen; but he was encouraged by their youthful confidence that they could overcome the challenges with him.

Of course, it wasn't just the parish's youth who encouraged Bart. During part of that first convalescence, Bart stayed with the Rector, then Duane Alvord, in the guest bedroom of his wheelchair accessible apartment, with parishioners providing them with every sort of casserole dinner known to humankind! While some of you looked after his food and housing, others looked after transportation to therapy and other appointments. Eventually an appropriate apartment was found for Bart and he was able to live independently, wheeling himself to church, to market -- we'd run into each other at our favorite Safeway, and to his work at the National Rehabilitation Hospital's Bethesda clinic. During this time he became part of the parish's Stephen Ministry pastoral care group, and completed the preliminary process towards his call to the ordained ministry; with the enthusiastic support of his discernment committee, the encouragement of the Vestry, and the approval of the Bishop of Washington, Bart was admitted to postulancy for Holy Orders. Bart had discussed this call from his first days at St. John's in 1993 -- probably with many of you for years before that; and he continued to ask how he might respond to this call through all the trials which followed. On good days while at the Hebrew Home, it was the possibility of serving the Christian residents with the support and encouragement of the Home's understanding Rabbi; on others, it was the possibility of serving other persons with disabilities in the larger community. All Bart wanted to do was to be of service to God and to others.

With your encouragement he did that and so many of you made that service possible. You continued to take him to appointments and bring him food. You visited him when it was difficult to do so; when he was in pain and depressed. You stuck with him when the disease made it impossible for him to tell stories and to laugh. He depended upon the evening calls from steadfast college chums, who together had provided his state-of-the-art wheelchair. And Jane, his dear sister, you stuck with Bart taking on responsibilities as his guardian, his legal and financial mainstay; you persevered through all the hoops of our overly-complicated and endlessly frustrating medical-legal system. And if there is anything right about this whole painful journey, it is that you were there to

experience that odd and wonderful peace of God in which Bart passed from this life into the life to come.

At the Stephen Ministers' dinner last evening, there was talk about all those who welcomed Bart in the life to come. Bart saw your face at the last, Jane, and then woke to new life seeing those who had gone before him; not just your parents, but those with whom he had lived and served here, Duane, Betty Ann, Barbara & Jack, Judy & George, a few among the many. With them all, he is now free to go from strength to strength in a life of perfect of service, continuing his practice of praying for us. At the end of a visit, Bart would often ask me to give his love to everyone, and that he was keeping us all in his prayers. Bart's priestly ministry was not affirmed by ordination in this life, but his priestly ministry to God and to us continues. In that we can have confidence, and for that we can be grateful.

Bart would have us know that the apostle Paul was right: Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Not tribulation, not disease, not frustration, not depression, nothing could separate Bart from the love of God. He would regularly remind you and me of that, and at times we would remind him. Bart would have us know that Jesus was right: The peace which he gives is nothing like that which the world gives; because the peace which Jesus gives can never be taken away. In that peace Bart now rests, and he prays that we may come through our anger and sorrow to welcome that same peace of God for ourselves, as well.

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