

The Rev. Kelly Koonce
Homily for the funeral of Lori Tullos Barta
Lamentations 3:22-26, 31-33
2 Corinthians 4:16-5:9
John 14:1-6

“[God] does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone” – so the author of Lamentations assures us. But that is not to say that affliction and grief will not come. There are many things that God does not will – suffering and death chief among them – but they are ours to bear nonetheless as inhabitants of this curious creation, this world, this life – so gorgeous and yet so dangerous, so vigorous and yet so frail. Death is a part of life. We know this. Nothing and no one escapes it. Yet, when death comes, it always seems to take us by surprise – not the fact of it, necessarily, but the force of it. When it comes out of place and out of time, it is doubly shocking. It leaves us stricken, short of breath, with puzzled minds and broken hearts.

Lori Barta died too soon. It is not sensible. It is not fair. Why do we have to be here today, doing this, of all things? How did a routine surgery turn to tragedy? What went wrong? I wish I knew the answers. But I’m not sure they would really make a difference. I’m not sure they would serve to blunt the pain.

What I do know is that Lori lives now in God and God lives in us, which means that she is not as far from us, nor we from her, as we might imagine. What we are grieving is not a relationship that has ended, but a relationship that has changed. Lori’s light has not been extinguished. It continues to shine in the life of her family, in the lives of her friends, in the lives of all of us gathered here and countless others far beyond these walls. Just as Lori burned on this earth with an unrelenting passion for justice and mercy,

with a seemingly boundless and indiscriminate love for all sorts and conditions of people, so she continues to blaze, like a newborn star, deep in the heart of God.

The early Christian theologian Irenaeus of Lyons famously wrote that “the glory of God is the human being fully alive.” When I hear that quote, I think of Lori. I did not have the privilege of knowing her personally. And yet, I feel I have met her, in a way, in the lives of those family members and friends with whom I’ve journeyed over the past week – in Adam, Emma, Hannah, and Sarah; in Gerry and Susan, Michael and Erin, Cyndi and Jennifer. And the woman I met in their eyes, in their words, in their laughter, and in their tears, was truly a force of nature. Precious wife, adoring mother, beloved daughter, sister, cousin, and friend, skilled attorney, tireless advocate and activist – Lori devoted her life to improving the lives of others. In 2008, she received the Distinguished Service Award from the Mayor’s Committee for People with Disabilities as a result of her work with the Down Syndrome Association of Central Texas. First as a committed volunteer and then as president of DSACT, Lori worked ceaselessly to raise awareness of the unique challenges facing those with mental disabilities in general and those with Down Syndrome in particular. She developed an Educator Manual and training program for teachers of children with Down Syndrome which remains in use throughout area school districts. She led efforts to educate parents of special needs children, helped develop an Inclusive Congregation Campaign for faith communities, and worked to train healthcare providers to care more effectively for individuals with Down Syndrome.

It is one thing to have faith. It is another, and more difficult thing, to live it. It is one thing to believe the gospel. It is another to embody it in our lives. Lori Barta was a living proclamation of the good news of God. She incarnated, daily, the gospel

imperative to reach out to and care for the downtrodden and the dispossessed, the left out and the left behind. As Adam put it, “It was almost as if [Lori] was destined to have a child with special needs,” because she had always reached out to those whom most of us would choose to avoid. Her particular passion for improving the lives of special needs children was born with her daughter Hannah. From the outset, Lori refused to accept the negative assessments and bleak predictions for the future that she and Adam received from so-called experts in the field. Following a particularly disappointing meeting with a geneticist not long after Hannah was born, Lori composed an email, a manifesto of sorts, to her family and friends. In it she wrote: “Bottom line, [the expert] said, is that there is no cure and Hannah will never be ‘normal.’ We walked into the meeting with hope and came out feeling numb and apprehensive about the future. Well, I refuse to accept that (gee, Dad . . . guess my stubborn streak came in handy after all!)! And that has led me to this 4 a.m. e-mail to you all. What is ‘normal’ anyway and why is that something to strive for? What is it that I really want for my children? When I strip away all the misplaced expectations and get down to basics, my wish for [my children] is this: (1) That they will be HAPPY; (2) That they will know they are LOVED and love others; and (3) That this world will be a better place because they are a part of it. So here I take the first step in trying to ensure that others love and value our children (and all children) as much as we do . . . When it comes to the TRULY important things in life, we need to start valuing individuals – with all their assets and limitations – and stop placing labels on our children! It has to start somewhere if we want this world to be a better place for them.” The rest, as they say, is history. The rest is passion. The rest is fire. The rest is gospel.

In the biblical understanding, the saints are all the people of God. I am a saint and you are a saint because God's Spirit dwells within us. But later Christian tradition narrowed the definition somewhat, defining saints as those whose unique holiness of life was worthy of emulation by others. I think it's safe to say that Lori was a saint in both senses. Of course, she was not perfect. She had her faults and her foibles, just like the rest of us. But the path she cleared is well worth following. The road she paved is well worth traveling. The life she lived is well worth emulating. If Lori could speak to us today, I believe she would tell us to continue what she began. Stoke the flames, tend the fire, shine the light, keep up the fight. When you encounter someone who is differently abled, don't pass by on the other side. Reach out to them, take hold of them, love them, and let them love you. See them for the gift that they are and receive the rich blessing that only they can give.

When I met with Lori's family on Saturday, Adam, Emma, and I took a walk in the fairy garden, a whimsical retreat that Lori designed for the girls in a secluded corner of the backyard. Adam asked Emma what she would like for me to tell you all about her mommy. Her response was brief and pure: "Tell them I loved her." As I look around this church today, I am overwhelmed by the outpouring of love for Lori. She was loved so well by so many because she loved so many so well. In the final analysis, that's what Lori did best: she loved. And I can think of no better testament to a life well lived. Lori's favorite quote, her mission statement, if you will, was "the reason we're here is to leave the world a better place than we found it." By any measure, she succeeded in spades. This world is truly a better place because Lori Barta was in it – eyes were opened

and lives were changed. We can only hope that someday the same might be said of us, that we might make such a difference.

I was going to conclude by saying “Rest well, good and faithful servant.” But I’m not sure that rest is in Lori’s vocabulary. I hope the angels have had their Wheaties, because they’ve sure got their hands full. I imagine that even now Lori is enlisting their help with some new celestial campaign. But before it begins, I can see her gathering the children in her arms and telling them how much they are valued, how much they are cherished, how much they are loved. And I can see God . . . smiling.