

**Sermon at the Burial of  
the Rt. Rev. Robert Wolterstorff**

*May 3, 2007*

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For Robert, born a child of God; baptized into the faith and ministry of the church; blessed for the sacred ministry of marriage and fatherhood; called to the discipline and leadership of Holy Orders; appointed to the line of apostles as a bishop of the church; brother, father, grandfather, son and friend: we give you thanks and praise O God. Amen.

Having come to San Diego and St. James only a few months ago, I feel fortunate to have had quite a few occasions on which to visit with Bishop Bob. He was gracious to me and gave me the privilege of listening to the stories he wanted to tell.

Maybe you have noticed that the very old tell a story more than once? Perhaps that has to do with the work each of us has to do to process our life's journey as we draw near to its end. Perhaps that has to do with the distillation of the wisdom we want to pass on. I don't know why we seem to need to do that in our final years, but I trust that what comes to the surface at that time is important. Those stories either need to be told for the sake of the teller, or they need to be heard by those who will listen.

One of Bob's stories was about his determination to call on people, a habit he set in his parish and a requirement he set for his staff. He made a point to call on twenty-five parishioners every week. On about the third or fourth time he told me that story, he added the detail that his calls were usually nothing more than saying hello in the driveway. He almost never accepted the invitation to come inside. He required his staff to call and make phone calls, and they all had quotas to reach every week. He had at least two volunteers who spent the whole week on the phone, calling people in the church, just to check in and say hello. One even earned the description of being "Father Bob's call girl."

The story included the reminder that those calls often kept people connected to the church. Someone he hadn't seen for a month would almost certainly be in church the next Sunday after Bob had stopped by.

Another of Bob's stories had to do with the struggle he faced as the civil rights movement tuned into the language of biblical justice, and Bob addressed the racist and ethnic prejudices of the community as sin. I don't think he was marching down the streets, but he put himself far enough out there that the struggle wounded him personally. For all his affection and devotion for the people of his congregation, the fact that he had members angry with him for calling for change and the fact that he had members angry with him for not calling for more change more stridently left its mark on him. It was one of the moments that he was proud of in his ministry, and it was one of stories he needed to tell at the end of his life because he had paid a price for it.

All of us want to be loved about as much as we want anything in this life. It takes a lot of courage to risk that love for the sake of a higher calling that is less tangible than the affection we stand to lose.

Bob also told the story of his Sunday School just about every time we met. "Six hundred children," he'd say. He'd say it as if it was a real headache to have such a large Sunday school, but I could tell how much that kind of a throng of children pleased him. "But that was a different time," he'd add. Just before mentioning one more time, "six hundred children." On the morning of his death I had the chance to reflect a bit with the woman who headed up Fr. Bob's Sunday school back in those days. "Well, maybe 250," she clarified.

Bob told the story of a moment in his early life as the first bishop of our diocese. A priest had been spending enough time in bars at the end of the day that parishioners were beginning to talk about it. Their concerns reached his ears at the Bishop's Office. He called the man and asked him to come for a visit. After asking about his family and the church, Bishop Bob laid it out pretty clearly. "This is what people are saying about you, and I want to know if you think it's a problem." The reaction was defensive, angry, belligerent. Bob pressed on though, finally making the point that it didn't matter if there was nothing wrong with it. What mattered was that if people thought there was something wrong it would diminish the man's capacity to lead the church and it would look bad for his congregation. The priest stormed out. But about two weeks later he called and said, "I was wrong to act that way and say what I said to you, and I apologize." Bishop Bob graciously accepted the apology. But the story ends with Bob's observation that there was never a problem after that, and he never heard another word about that priest spending too many afternoons in the bars.

Another story starts that as a new bishop he took a stand against the ordination of women. In his telling, that was what he believed was right and true. The story continues though, told by Fr. Blayne Colmore, about when he brought the Rev. Susan Tobias onto the staff of St. James. Bishop Bob did a wonderful job of keeping his nose out of the business of the rectors and bishops who succeeded him. "That's your call. You're the rector, and I'm not going to interfere." Susan began to serve as one of the priests of the parish, and Bishop Bob made a point to come to the altar rail on the side where he would not receive communion from her. After several weeks of this, the Sunday came that Bob crossed the aisle to come to the rail at Susan's side, making a point to receive communion from her. The role of women clergy at St. James was never an issue for him again after that.

In all the times he told me about his stance on women's ordination as a bishop, he never said he had been wrong. What he said was, that he was glad he was able to change his mind.

What might we draw from these stories Bishop Bob told again and again in the last years of his life?

First, the church's work is always about people. Bob's devotion to calling, to reaching out to others, to greeting people by name not only endeared him to us but it gave people the chance to enter into a relationship with Jesus Christ. None of us who are serious about the faith came to faith by ourselves. All of us needed someone else to encourage us, teach us, prod us, and love us enough that the calling of Christ became possible and then true enough to live by. This throng today is not because we had to go find Bob. We're here today because Father Bob made a point to come find us.

Second, you don't need to wear a flak jacket if you're not going fly over the targets. Part of being faithful to Jesus Christ is changing the systems that oppress people, bringing justice to those treated unfairly, and standing up for peace when violence and hatred are the inclinations of our human nature. This kind of faithfulness moves us politically as well as emotionally, and it brings about both the joy at having given voice to the full range of God's love as well as the agony of offending people we love and wish we could please.

Third, telling the truth in love bears wonderful fruit. Bishop Bob's confrontation with one of his priests not only exhibited the high standards Bob held for himself and others, but it also provided a healing moment in the life of a man, in that man's role as a rector, and possibly for his church. Bob's intervention arrested a nonchalant pattern of behavior that could have become far more destructive had it become addictive for the individual priest or scandalous for the church. Not only do we tell the truth in love, but loving means we tell the truth when we need to.

Fourth, it is a wonderful thing to keep growing for the whole of a life. Bob's change of mind about the role of women in the church doesn't minimize the disquiet and pain his stance as a bishop caused those who felt confused by a leading of the spirit and the resistance they encountered with Robert as their bishop. But Bishop Bob had the strength of ego, the freedom that comes from humility, and the centering strength of joy so that he could change, he could grow, and he could keep developing all his days.

There is a gift that comes with many years, in that there is time to work out enough of one's own issues that it becomes possible for us to become sweet. That's not an inevitable outcome of aging. Aging can also lead to hardening of the heart and stiffening of the emotions. But, the grace of a long life is that one can become truly sweet, as Bob gave us the example and reminder.

Fifth, remembering the 600 children in Sunday School when the person in charge remembers, "well, maybe 250." Whether one fishes for fish, or as a disciple of Jesus fishes for people: all fisherman catch the biggest fish that anyone ever caught.

Finally, we can draw from the example of Bob's life a reminder of what it means to avoid dying unprepared. This comes not from stories, but from actions. As a father, grandfather, member of the church, and bishop, Bob never ended his time with any of us without giving us his blessing. Not the formal blessing of the prayer book, but the genuine blessing of one who only wanted the best for the rest of us. He and I never finished a conversation but that he said thank you. We often finished by saying that we

loved each other. I watched him always show you, his family, affection; and he always told me how thankful he was for your care and attention to him. None of you need wonder if he loved you, and so he set you free to thrive in your own lives, freed from being bound to his. That's the best preparation for death any of us could achieve, and it's part of what makes us wish he could still be with us in this life.

Thank you God for Robert, for his love of this Episcopal Church, for his steady life of faith as a follower of Jesus. Thank you for the gift of our new life together in Christ, in which we are only separated, not cut off, by the veil of death. Thank you for Bob's generosity in friendship, strength of character, and good example. But especially we thank you for his love, his ready words of encouragement, for the joy he shared with others, and all the blessings he so freely offered us. In the Name of Christ. Amen.