

Frances Hartzell was never shy about expressing her opinions. If you didn't get into an argument with her at some point in your life, you probably weren't listening. She was a strong woman, a capable business person, a leader in politics, a lover of local history, an anchor of faith for this parish, a treasured member of her family, and a trustworthy friend.

She loved coming to church; she told her friends the hardest part of being sick recently was not coming here each weekend. She loved it here, but she always sat in the back corner. In fact, this is the closest Frances has come to the altar in the 6 years I've known her. She used to complain about how poor the sound system is in our church, and I used to tell her it was because she chose to sit as far away from the speakers as was physically possible. She never budged from her pew or her opinion. I really grew in admiration for her, for her convictions, for her ability to size up a situation and to propose solutions that were practical and helpful.

Frances leaves the world a better place than she found it, but she had a difficult life. Her mother died when she was very young. In her first years Frances was already learning the sorrow of losing a loved one, as well as the strength that comes from the kindness of others. People helped her, and she got up on her feet, a towering figure. With her dear friend Rose Kenney, Frances started an insurance agency. Other women had taken over agencies from their deceased husbands or fathers, but no woman had ever started up a business like this from scratch – not until Frances and Rose did it. Sixty years later, Frances was still in the office, helping people hope for a better life.

St. Paul says to the Romans, "Hope does not disappoint because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." Christ died for us, Paul says. Even when we make ourselves enemies with God, the death of Christ offers us reconciliation. We crave reconciliation. We need it with our neighbor, with members of our family; we need reconciliation with ourselves when we behave in ways that bring us shame. We need reconciliation with God, and the death of Christ gives us that hope – a hope that does not disappoint.

In John's gospel Jesus says, "Whoever hears my word and believes in the one who sent me has passed from death to life. . . . The hour is coming," he says, "in which all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and will come out." That is our prayer, that through hearing the word of God – with or without a good sound system – and through our belief in God, we will rise from whatever tomb stifles us – whatever doubt, misbehavior or death.

Frances Hartzell experienced adversity and reconciliation throughout her life. Now Christ offers her the reconciliation that surpasses all others. As we remember her today, let us ask God for the grace of faith, a hunger to hear his word, and the gift of eternal life. Then one day, with Frances, we will praise God for ever in the kingdom of light and peace.