

Beth Heidler

I told Tim I've known Beth Heidler since she was Beth Jesaitis. Tim said, "So have I." I also told him I'm a better person today because of Beth, and I imagine a great number of you here today would respond, "So am I." Beth opened my eyes to the wrongs of racism, the plight of violent neighborhoods, the scarcity of rights for women, the loneliness among some people of faith, the need for competent counseling services, the scourge of addiction, the remoteness of recovery, the loss of loved ones, the absence of jurisprudence for the poor, and the basic hunger of human beings for God and for a community of faith. Beth did not just talk about those concerns; she threw her time and energy into them.

To many people Beth possessed a Christlike ability to rescue from danger, oppression, and personal mistakes. There was another Beth, beaten down by her own struggles, choosing words and actions not helpful to her or life-giving to those she loved. In her mature years, it seemed as though Beth was making up for lost time. Amazed at all God had done in her life, she lifted up others into joy. Not content with hope for a better future; she achieved a better present. She possessed an irrepressible inner joy because she saw the world through the eyes of its Creator, through the eyes of an artist. Even when things did not go her way, she reacted not with impulsive gripes, but with determined joy.

Beth wanted us to hear Zephaniah's prophecy today, one passage the Catholic Church assigns to Advent's Third Sunday, the one we call "Gaudete", meaning "Rejoice!" The prophet addressed a people who had made mistakes, broken covenants, and compromised their principles. They were suffering the consequences of their own bad behavior. But Zephaniah commanded them to shout for joy. "Be glad and exult with all your heart.... The Lord has removed the judgment against you; he has turned away your enemies." No matter the affliction, God's love surpasses it. God loves us so much, Zephaniah proclaims, that "he will rejoice over you with gladness, and renew you in his love, he will sing joyfully because of you, as one sings at festivals." For anyone who has suffered abuse, prejudice, injustice, addiction, or improper parenting, this prophecy amazes. In your suffering God loves you; God sings for joy over you.

When St. Paul tells the Corinthians, "we will all be changed," he proclaims salvation. Illness and affliction signify our mortality, but Paul says, what "is mortal must clothe itself with immortality." The readings Beth chose for us pound home the message of love. Jesus told the disciples at the Last Supper, "As the Father loves me, so I also love you.... I have told you this so that my joy might be in you and your joy might be complete." Jesus did not ignore the inability of his disciples to get along with one another, but he gave them this command before he died: Don't keep living that way. "Love one another as I love you." Love does not ignore the hurts of the past; love is the medicine that heals.

Beth could see how your life could be better, and she wasn't shy about telling you. We all need people to correct us. We tend not to listen to those with whom we disagree, but even they are sometimes right. I became a better person because I listened to Beth. She became a better person because she listened to God. Ultimately, we will all be changed. If we change now for the good, we will experience happiness amid suffering, and God will sing for joy.

Saturday, January 15, 2022