

A Homily Delivered by
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Saint Peter's Episcopal Church
Glenside, Pennsylvania

Memorial Service
December 6, 2008

Elizabeth A. T. Broadbent
July 22, 1922 - November 30, 2008

The task of the preacher on any occasion is to preach the good news, and to proclaim the resurrection of Christ. That is what we are doing today as we give thanks for the life of Elizabeth Broadbent. I am honored to be here in this pulpit on this occasion, at this church, giving tribute to a woman I have known for over 40 years, yet a person I had little direct contact with over the span of those years. There were two times, however, when our lives significantly crossed at special moments, and I would like to offer those occasions as evidence of the quality and dignity of life evidenced by Elizabeth.

As most of you know, Elizabeth was the parish secretary here at Saint Peter's Church for thirty-two years. She saw it all. During that time she had occasion to deal with virtually every problem that affects church life; irascible parishioners, ornery clergy, reluctant lay readers, absent vestry members, troubled teens, fussy altar guild members, overworked choir directors, and unappreciated church school leaders. On top of that, in the year 1967 she had to put up with ME, a brand new seminarian who had been assigned to St. Peter's Church by the Bishop to work alongside Charles Long, the rector, in order to get a sense of what the Episcopal Church was all about, and to see how it operated at its best. The bishop felt I would mature and grow at Saint Peter's as I got a feel for parish life.

So when I first met Elizabeth in the parish office I was a bit taken back. She began to explain to me all the things that went on behind the scenes at a busy church. In my naiveté I was stunned to realize there were so many activities, and responsibilities and schedules, and appointments, and worship services, and so on, and on, and on all these religious activities that were taking place were staggering and overwhelming. I was surprised, and quite frankly humbled, to learn that clergy really didn't run the show as they were teaching me in seminary; but the real leaders were the Elizabeth's-of-the-world: Elizabeth Miller, the Director of Education, and Elizabeth Broadbent, the parish secretary and administrator. I also discovered how versatile and hardworking the Choir Director, the Associate Minister, and the Sexton were. Together, they were the true stalwarts and backbone of the parish.

So thank you Elizabeth for teaching me the value of teamwork and vocational humility. It was my first and best lesson in organizational management. Ever since then, throughout my career in ministry, I have fortunately had remarkably good rapport with church staffs,

parish administrators and secretaries, and I am grateful for being given an early heads-up about how effective parishes work. For me, it began right here.

But in those early days what I recall most clearly about Elizabeth Broadbent was the help she gave me at the time of my ordination in this very sanctuary. Late spring of 1971 was a very busy time. The bishop was coming, confirmation was anticipated for a large class of young people, a baptism was scheduled, and I was being ordained to the priesthood. What a tall order to orchestrate all those events at one time, even under normal circumstances.

For some reason, further complicating those challenges Elizabeth was facing, I forgot to submit the order of service for my ordination. Now mind you, this was a time prior to the era of computers and word processing. In fact it was even before “electric” or the newly evolving “electronic” typewriters. Stencils and mimeographs were state of the art: and for extraordinary occasions, local printers were called upon to crank out embossed copies of special leaflets.

I’m not sure how she did it, but after I finally got the ordination material to her at the last minute on a Friday – in a whirlwind of activity she typed it up, rushed it to the printers, returned and collated several hundred copies by hand staying late into the evening; and then finally she put everything in perfect order so the bishop could place his hands on my head the next day at the appointed hour.

Thank you Elizabeth for teaching me at the time of my ordination the need for persistence, perseverance, and patience (the three “p’s”) – all necessary ingredients for “grace” in ministry. Your ordination gift to me was your demonstration of the practical value of sticking with a job until it gets done, and making sure it’s done right.

Now fast-forward forty years to last Saturday night. I was called by Elizabeth’s daughter, Barbara, and told that the family had been notified by the medical staff the end was very near. I hastily grabbed my portable communion kit and met with daughters Barbara and Sue at their mother’s room. It was decided that even though Elizabeth was not fully conscious, we would nevertheless have a simple communion service from the Prayerbook that contained the familiar words and phrases.

As the service progressed, I noticed Elizabeth rallied somewhat. She perked up at the words of the Lord’s Prayer, and then at the conclusion when I offered the consecrated elements of bread and wine, to my surprise she opened her mouth to receive the wafer. After that, quite honestly I feared the worst. I offered Elizabeth the small communion cup for a sip of wine. I tipped it carefully to her lips not wanting to make any mess. Then as I began to draw away, she reached up with her hand, took control of the cup, and made sure she had her full portion of the consecrated wine; Christ’s blood. Her eyes opened slightly, and I detected a twinkle. No clergy person would get in the way of her legitimate claim to the means of grace and the hope of glory.

I thought to myself she deserved it, and I had just been privileged to share a last meal between Christ and a special member of His church. Thank you Elizabeth for literally taking matters into your own hands, and symbolically giving thanks for all the blessings of life, yours as well as all those whose lives you touched. Like you, we all have final responsibility to grab hold of that cup of salvation and drink generously from it as we launch ourselves into the realm of everlasting life.

And so we come full circle in today's service to where Elizabeth began: putting the leaflet together for still another liturgy at Saint Peter's. Appropriately, one of Elizabeth's favorite hymns was ***"I love to tell the story of unseen things above, of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love."*** Technically, it's not a standard listing in the Episcopal hymnal but her daughters and I felt we should use it anyway, so we borrowed it from the Presbyterians and shamelessly blended it into the Burial Office. Elizabeth never had any trouble taking a few liberties of her own with the Episcopal Church, so why be persnickety now? Bless her heart for being true to herself.

We honor her, we remember her, and we give thanks for her presence among us as a follower of Christ, devoted to a "life of perfect service." She clearly loved to tell the story, and it will be her theme in glory. May we all aspire to the example she set....

In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. AMEN