

S. Rosemary Lee's Funeral Reflection

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Reflections for Sister Rosemary Lee's Funeral

For her funeral liturgy Rosemary left us with Scriptural readings about shepherding. As I prayed with these passages, I wondered what it was that she heard in them and what she wanted us to know today. Most often, I hear these readings as powerful reflections on the nature of God, a God to whom each person is precious and worthy of rescuing when lost. But this week, I found myself trying to imagine what Rosemary might have heard and understood from her own perspective of failing health and energy; from a place of growing dependence upon others for her care. Was she already letting go into the mystery of love in ways I cannot yet envision?

An actual lost sheep, one that has wandered away from the flock, could find itself in situations that sound like life experiences we know. The sheep might be alone, unable to find its way. It might be stuck and in need of someone to free it. It might be injured and helpless. Recently I read a passage from Richard Rohr that sounds something like a lost sheep: "Sooner or later," he writes, "life is going to lead us into a situation that we can't fix, can't control, and can't explain or understand." Surely these last years of Rosemary's life have been very much out of her control. Her movement and her words were more and more limited. But we do not know what kind of re-shaping of her spirit was going on in that time. We do not know what was opening in her in ways deeper than words could express. Rohr's quote begins with a difficult truth and ends with a bold statement of faith: "Sooner or later, life is going to lead us into a situation that we can't fix, can't control, and can't explain or understand." And, he continues, "That's where transformation most quickly happens. That's when we're uniquely in the hands of God."

While reflecting on Rosemary's active years, it was easy to trace some of the ways in which she cooperated with the movements of grace. The memories and stories of those who lived with her had some common threads. She is remembered as a simple soul – in a very positive way – one not given to being in the limelight. Several people commented that she would often do the more menial jobs that weren't noticed a great deal. One person shared a story from ten or more years ago, when Rosemary was living on the 1st floor in Clare Hall.

It seems that the ice maker in the kitchenette wasn't terribly dependable at the time, and so Rosemary took it upon herself to walk out there every hour and chip up the ice so that everyone had it for their water. Others, too, spoke of her thoughtfulness, remembering that she made little homemade gifts for everyone with whom she lived at Christmas time. She enjoyed crocheting and made beautiful latch hook rugs as

well. Fr. Leopold commented that during those many years in the mail room at Marian, "S. Rosemary was a sort of needle and thread binding the members of the Marian community into one fabric." But she did seem to like to keep her softer side partially hidden under a somewhat gruff demeanor. A number of my students made sort of a game out of trying to get her to smile or chuckle. They were smart enough to know that beneath her tough manner, there was a soft heart. Marilyn told me that one person who worked at Marian had her own nickname for Rosemary: "Toughie." That part of her was not at all convincing when you got to know her. She would do anything for you.

Undoubtedly, Rosemary was shaped by her family, and by the people and situations where she ministered, learning how and where her help was needed. But what of these last more hidden years? Rohr says that is where transformation most quickly happens. That is when we are uniquely in the hands of God. This is difficult to understand. But listening to the readings today, that seems to be the message. The lost sheep in the gospel parable is not celebrated because it figured out how to right itself and find its way home unscathed. The celebration is not about achievements, but about reestablishing oneness. The great joy is that of divine goodness shared and received. In the Isaiah reading, we hear the generous activity of God described as a shepherd who gathers the lambs in his arms, carries them, and leads them home.

We celebrate today Rosemary's homecoming, her letting go into God's embrace, her allowing herself to be carried. We are grateful for the gift of her life and all the ways she shared them. And when we sing the closing hymn she selected we will be singing with her, "How Great thou art," our ingathering God who transforms us and readies us in so many hidden ways to be made one with You.