

Sweet Holy Spirit, sweet heavenly dove,  
stay right here with us,  
filling us with your love. Amen.

(Please, be seated.)

I wonder if you remember a few years ago when the Broadway actress and singer Patti Lupone performing in a revival of *Gypsy* stopped the show, broke the "fourth wall," and berated an audience member who was using his cell phone? She launched into what has been called a "blistering tirade" and "legendary rant," and had the spectator thrown out of the theater. Her moment of ignominy is preserved forever on YouTube.

In contrast, there is a story about Wynton Marsalis playing at the Village Vanguard in New York City's Greenwich Village in 2001 told by *The New Republic's* music critic David Hajdu:

The fourth song was a solo showcase for the trumpeter . . . . He played a ballad, "I Don't Stand a Ghost of a Chance With You," unaccompanied. Written by Victor Young, a film-score composer, for a 1930s romance, the piece can bring out the sadness in any scene, and Marsalis appeared deeply attuned to its melancholy. He performed the song in murmurs and sighs, at points nearly talking the words in notes. It was a wrenching act of creative expression. When he reached the climax, Marsalis played the final phrase, the title statement, in declarative tones, allowing each successive note to linger in the air a bit longer. "I don't stand . . . a ghost . . . of . . . a . . . chance . . ." The room was silent until, at the most dramatic point, someone's cell phone went off, blaring a rapid singsong melody in electronic bleeps. People started giggling and picking up their drinks. The moment — the whole performance — unraveled.

Marsalis paused for a beat, motionless, and his eyebrows arched. I scrawled on a sheet of notepaper, MAGIC, RUINED. The cell-phone offender scooted into the hall as the chatter in the room grew louder. Still frozen at the microphone, Marsalis replayed the silly cell-phone melody note for note. Then he repeated it, and began improvising variations on the tune. The audience slowly came back to him. In a few minutes he resolved the improvisation—which had changed keys once or twice and throttled down to a ballad tempo — and ended up exactly where he had left off: "with . . . you . . ." The ovation was tremendous. (*The Atlantic*, March 2003)

Ms. Lupone allowed a momentary distraction to ruin her performance. Wynton Marsalis transformed a rude interruption into a moment of glory. He didn't allow an unexpected shock to stun or silence him. Instead, he turned a setback into a comeback.

Bertie Stamper, whom we are gathered to remember and honor today, who finished her decades long career as a church organist here in this parish, insisted that she was not an improvisationalist; she played, she said, the notes that were on the page, that's all. Her attitude was much like that of her favorite composer, Johann Sebastian Bach, who said, "I play the notes as they are written, but it is God who makes the music." But in the eleven years I was privileged to work here with Bertie I saw her improvise again and again, turning many moments of doubt or interruption into moments of glory.

It is the lot of the director of small volunteer church choir to never quite know what one will have to work with on a Sunday morning. All the planning and rehearsal ahead of time is often rendered moot by the reality of who shows up. Choristers have lives and sometimes those lives conflict with Sunday morning schedules. As John Lennon said, "Life is what happens while you're making other plans." Many the Sunday morning I watched Bertie quickly rework her arrangements, reassign parts, change harmony singing to unison, and create something wonderful out the mix of voices life had given her to work with.

Bertie with her little choir of volunteer voices was every bit the improviser Wynton Marsalis was with his trumpet; unlike Ms. Lupone, she didn't let life's little interruptions get in her way. She had that sort of faith that is expressed by Prophet Jeremiah in our reading today from the Book of Lamentations (which Bertie selected, by the way; she selected all of the readings and all but one of today's hymns). Jeremiah wrote, "The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning." Depending on that divine love and those never ending mercies, Bertie could and did face anything, whether it was a choir member failing to show up, her late husband Tim's failing memory, or her own failing health. St. Paul was surely right when he wrote that "our outer nature is wasting away;" Bertie knew that as well as any of us, but she didn't let it get her down. She dealt with it; she made the best of it; she improvised; and she went on.

One of my favorite recent memories of Bertie was when she went through her last round of chemotherapy and lost her hair. She was given the opportunity to get a wig and when she went to pick it up, she learned she could get not one, but two wigs. So she got one which was a match for the shining silver hair I only ever knew her to have, but then got a second that was strawberry blonde, a hair color she told me she sported earlier in life. She wore that red-headed wig to church one Sunday, smiling from ear to ear, and laughing at all the double-takes she got from the folks in this church. Her outer nature may have been wasting away, but like Wynton Marsalis glorifying that cell-phone ring, she sported that strawberry blonde wig with joy and reflected that "eternal weight of glory beyond all measure" for which God has prepared us and "given us the Spirit as a guarantee."

Bertie came to St. Paul's in 2005. When I accepted the call to be rector in 2003, Christopher White, an Oberlin Conservatory student, was our organist; Chris was often gone during the summers so we had to scramble for substitutes and, somehow, I got Bertie's name as a potential substitute even though, at the time, she was working every Sunday at another church nearby. She turned out to be available to us anyway because she could do the early service at that church, which in those days was an hour and half before our service with music, run up here, play our service, then scoot back to the other church and play their late service. After doing that a couple of times in summer of 2004, she told me that if and when Christopher left and we needed to replace him, she would be interested. When Chris left here in 2005 to go get his PhD at Yale, I'd forgotten that conversation and put an ad in the AGO Cleveland newsletter. Bertie called, reminded me that she was interested, and asked for an interview. She also told me that the AGO had transposed a couple of digits in our phone number and I probably wouldn't be getting any other inquiries. She was right, but it didn't matter; she got the job.

The parish had then, and still has, a tradition of giving the choir the summer off and asking for volunteers to sing solos or duets or whatever at the offertory each week. The first summer she was here, on a weekend when her sister Virginia was visiting, Bertie somewhere sweet talked her sisters into singing a trio with her and the song they sang was the source of my opening prayer, *Sweet, Sweet Spirit* by Doris Akers. It's a simple song, as most Gospel melodies are, but it has such a profound message of our need to surrender to God:

There are blessings you cannot receive  
Til you know him in his fullness, and believe  
You're the one to profit when you say  
"I am going to walk with Jesus all the way."

My memory of Bertie and her sisters singing that song is so strong that whenever I hear it I think of them, and I was surprised that it wasn't one of the songs she selected for this memorial. Even though she didn't ask for it, I had it copied and put your bulletins because (as I said) I so strongly associate it with her. It's message of salvation echoes the lesson from John's Gospel that Bertie selected, Jesus' words to Thomas, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

From the very start of her tenure as our music director and choir mistress, Bertie was game for just about anything. We threw a lot of unfamiliar stuff at her and with Wynton Marsalis like agility, she improvised and so many things happened here through her effort! We started and for several years offered an ecumenical "Red Mass," a service of blessing for the judges and lawyers of our courts and legal system that is a part of our English legal and Anglican religious heritage; the offerings received at those services benefited a local charity for police officers, fire fighters, and other "first responders." We also teamed with other churches to offer an ecumenical "Three Great Hours" service on Good Fridays; the offertory gifts from those services benefited the scholarship fund of the Medina Ministerial Association. Our monthly free-to-the-public lunchtime Brown Bag Concert series was started and sustained with her good work.

The tradition developed of beginning each fall season of the Brown Bag Concerts and ending each spring season with an organ recital. Bertie loved our funky little hundred-year old pipe organ; her predecessor Dr. White once referred to it as a "pastiche," which is a nice way of saying that it is an odd and mysterious mix of ranks and voices selected, discarded, changed, and thrown together by who knows how many organists and organ builders during its life. It started out as a tracker instrument built sometime in the first decade of the 20th Century by Carl Barckhoff, but we have no records to tell us what its original make-up was. We know that it had a rank of *vox humana* at some time because we found the pipes in the rafters of the church garage. In any event, as weird as it is, Bertie loved it and oversaw some renovations and upgrades during her tenure.

When she retired, we started the Roberta Stamper Organ Improvement Fund to continue its enhancement. When, for reasons still unknown, the ceiling over the pipe box fell and damaged the organ this past May, she was heartbroken but also excited that repairing the damage might give us an opportunity to develop the instrument further, and the Stamper Fund will help to accomplish that. St. Paul's Parish is grateful that Bertie and her family has asked that your memorial donations be made to the organ fund. One of the things that Bertie and I always used to joke about is the fact that although we often have the largest congregations at weddings and

funerals, we seldom, if ever, pass the plate at such services. Today, we'll be breaking with that tradition; in consultation with the family, we've decided to take up an offering in support of this instrument that Bertie so loved. When the organ has been repaired and improved and is fully restored, we will hold a special service of rededication at which, the Vestry has decided, it will be formally designated the Roberta E. Stamper Memorial Organ. As that old gospel song says, "There's a sweet, sweet spirit in this place." In this place, in addition to the Holy Spirit of God, we are privileged to have known and to continue know the sweet, sweet spirit of Bertie Stamper which the dedication of the organ will perpetuate.

Bertie loved sacred music in all its varieties. She was, of course, especially fond of Johann Sebastian Bach; she and I got into the habit of referring to the composer simply by his initials, JSB. Sometimes when she was practicing she would get frustrated and I would hear her mutter a complaint, almost always directed at herself, never the instrument or composition. I would say to her, "Remember what JSB said, that there's nothing remarkable about playing the organ: "All one has to do is hit the right keys at the right time and the instrument plays itself." — "Yeah, right!" she would laugh and get back to practicing.

She knew the truth of what Colgate University Music Professor Joseph Swain wrote several years ago: "It is the organist who provides a musical frame and substance to the liturgy, a definite beginning and ending and all the transitions required to make of the liturgy a living, sacred artwork." ("Death of the Organist," *Touchstone Magazine*, Sept/Oct 1999) My preaching professor in seminary made a similar point. He reminded us that no matter how much work we put into our homilies, no matter how astute the theology, no matter how artful the turn of phrase, our words are not going to be what most affects the congregation; it's the music. As Prof. Siciliano put it, "Never forget: they don't go out humming the sermon!"

Sweet Holy Spirit, sweet heavenly dove,  
stay right here with us, filling us with your love.  
And for these blessings, we lift our hearts in praise:  
Without a doubt we'll know, that we have been revived,  
when we shall leave this place.

Maybe we don't go out humming the sermon on most days . . . but this day . . . let's end this sermon with a Wynton Marsalis style moment of glory by lifting our hearts in praise for the blessing that was Bertie Stamper as we celebrate her sweet, sweet spirit that will always be loved and remembered in this place. Amen.

(Mr. Gooding?.....)