

Funeral Homily for Harry Moseley
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
The Rev. Ian Burch
July 31, 2021

Harry Moseley was the first parishioner I ever met at St. Mark's who wasn't part of the search committee. He was sitting on a folding chair out in front of those red doors on a warm and bright October afternoon. He was in a blue fleece, a Common Ground hat, and was surrounded by pumpkins. I was clearly here to interview for the job because I was in a black suit and a collar, and he took a few minutes to talk to me about his love of this church and the pumpkin sale. He was quick to point out that the church raised the money only to give it all away.

I remember our conversation well because I was trying to get a feel for this place and to see whether it would be a good fit for me and my family. Harry talked about the work of the Outreach Committee and of Common Ground in near reverent tones. He was a striking man — tall and handsome with a prominent nose and a white shock of hair. He was not at all shy with an opinion. He also had a broad smile that came out when he was working with other church people on a project, finding something amusing, or pouring you a glass of wine at his house. That Harry Moseley smile was absolutely radiant, and you were lucky indeed if you got a chance to see it.

I know that Harry loved the music, the rituals, and the beauty of the church. I know this because he planned this entire service himself from his deathbed. But on that sunny October day when I first met him, Harry didn't talk about what happens inside this building. He spent our entire first conversation talking about what happens outside of this building. He walked with such pride about the work that the people of this parish do to help the marginalized, the poor, and those in need. To watch Harry walking around the kitchens at The Gathering on a day when St. Mark's was serving was to watch a very happy man, in his element, like a major general inspecting the troops before deployment. Service to his fellow person was his love, and for him, the whole point of the church was to love one another and then to get out of these walls and to love our neighbors. I even watched him carry immensely heavy loads of stuff out of our church basement when we cleaned out the Thrift Shop, even while he was undergoing chemo. He put that rowers' musculature to good use in the service of the church and the poor.

I remember one Sunday before COVID when Harry came to the communion rail and knelt to receive the Body and Blood of Christ. Of course he came at the end of the line because he so often served as an usher. It was so like him to be of service even on a Sunday morning. As he knelt there, I could see that he was not well. I didn't know whether it was his chemo or whether it was his cancer, but I knew at that moment that I would be preaching at Harry's funeral. I pressed the bread into his hand and was reminded that this is the way that Christian people choose to face death. We say that God's table is a place for every generation, the living as well as the dead. We say that when we receive this meal, we are receiving a piece of heaven, a foretaste of the banquet from the end of time. I was with Harry, Michelle, and Ellie a few days before Harry died, and we all shared communion together, as a piece of comfort and as a small act of defiance in the face of the ravages of cancer and death. We participated in an act of enormous faith, even while we all knew that Harry's time on earth was short.

And, I can tell you, that Harry's mind that afternoon was not at all on himself. His mind was on all of you, here today. He left strict instructions for how you should all be fed after the service. He left instructions about the lively music and the time of day. He even specified that the wine should be "good, drinkable stuff" and not too cheap. He envisioned his funeral as a place where the church could come together after a long pandemic and begin to experience itself as a house of joy again. Harry wanted singing and stories and beauty here today. Even as he approached death, Harry thought and acted like a servant, like a man committed to the welfare and well-being of others.

In the Old Testament reading, the prophet Micah has come to the Israelites to admonish them. Micah reminds them that the smoke from incense and the animals on the altar are not pleasing to God. But instead, the only sacrifice that is acceptable to the Lord God is that the people do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly. I cannot think of a piece of scripture more appropriate to read at the funeral of Harry Moseley. Harry knew in his bones that what happens inside of this building only has meaning when it is connected to what happens outside of this building. Harry knew that the God we worship is first and foremost in the business of tending the poor, the weak, the vulnerable, and the hungry. No amount of perfection in worship can please God in the way that one meal served at The Gathering can.

I know that I am in the middle of giving a sermon on a passage from Micah. But it occurs to me that the better sermon on the text is the life of Harry Moseley. The church teaches that death is not the end of the story. I wonder if Harry is preaching to us with a life well lived even a year after he has died. What would this world look like if we listened closely to the way Harry lived his faith? Would the world be a little bit of a better place? I think that it would be.

Harry embodied the words of the prophet. And he continues to preach to us with his life. His legacy is in his family. His legacy is at this parish. Even his earthly remains are woven into the fabric of this parish, at rest and at peace. Not all of us have the same kind of power that Harry had, and I think he, to the best of his ability, used it in the way that the prophet requires of us. I think that Harry strove for justice, loved mercy, and walked humbly as in the words of scripture.

And he has not left. He is here at God's altar. He is here in the love he shared at this church. And he is there in the lives of his family and of all those who love him. And looking out on this congregation, I can see that he was well-loved. We will miss you greatly, Harry, and the world is diminished with you gone. Thank you for living the life that you lived, and thank you for showing us what Christian service looks like. To God be the glory, even unto death. Alleluia and Amen.