

## Remembering Carolyn Schrock-Shenk

Memorial service homily  
Psalm 139

Karl Shelly  
Assembly Mennonite Church  
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Like some of you, my earliest memories of Carolyn are of when she was ambulatory, still upright. In fact my earliest memory is probably 25 years old, and it's of playing volleyball with Carolyn at an MCC retreat in some Pennsylvania gymnasium. And perhaps it won't surprise you to hear that she was a force to be reckoned with. Maybe she wasn't the most skilled player on the court, but she was the most tenacious! I can still see her, playing to win, with that fearless, competitive grin on her face.

For the last 18 years, I've been Carolyn's pastor. But first I was her friend. And for her, that was how she wanted us to think of our relationship – as longtime friends. If I became her pastor, she feared we'd lose that important sense of mutuality that was so important to her; where we could both confess the messy truths about our lives without fear of judgment. If I became her pastor, the power dynamics would shift, and Carolyn was very mindful of power dynamics. And if I became her pastor, she feared she would then have to suffer my pious platitudes.

So I worked hard at keeping my platitudes in check as I pastored and sojourned and examined things sacred and profane with my dear, old friend. And sometimes we would talk about God; you know, as friends. And the meaning of life. And the meaning of suffering, and the writing of the book she'd been conceptualizing for years titled, "*Where God Went Wrong*." It was her holy lament about those things which shouldn't be – things like children dying, paraplegia, and mosquitoes. And Carolyn carried no shortage of scars to give her laments a full measure of credibility. Our conversation on these matters continued right up to the last words we spoke together, just hours before her death, when she asked me if it was okay if she just let go and give up. That's hard question to ask a friend. But I knew the answer.

The story of Carolyn's life is too vast and complex to fit neatly under any one theme. You've heard important parts of her story told earlier by family and a friend. And I encourage you to stay for further storytelling at the conclusion of this service. There are so many facets of her life worthy of naming and honoring. Yet clearly a major motif of her professional and personal life was peace and conflict. It's there in the title of the book she co-edited, "*Making Peace with Conflict*" (read by many of her Goshen College students). Carolyn had a strong belief in the truism that "conflict is an opportunity for growth." And for as long as I knew Carolyn, it wasn't unusual to find her in the midst of a potential growth spurt.

Carolyn had the heart of a rabble-rouser, an activist, a conflict transformation practitioner. Even though she worked in an academic setting, and longed for acceptance in that world, she also knew she was cut from a different cloth. She was an educator/advocate who was not reluctant to question, to confront, or to resist, for she knew the best about conflict -- that through conflict we can come to see that which we were blind to; through conflict we can move from being strangers to community; and through conflict we can transform injustice and make broken things new. This is holy work. It is the work of prophets, of those willing to turn over a few tables, of those feisty enough to persist in the face of substantial obstacles. And overcoming obstacles was Carolyn's super power.

But what do you do when some obstacles turn out to be insurmountable? Or when a conflict wounds another and causes estrangement? Or when the long, hoped for and fought for healing just doesn't come?

These are the things we talked about and at times wept over. The defeats – whether physical, political, or personal – burned bitterly inside her. It wasn't in her DNA to give up or give in. I recall one Sunday morning when our congregation was discussing what is known as the Welcoming Prayer – this is the spiritual practice of deliberately consenting to God's presence in the midst of hard events in our life, like suffering and



calamity; seeking to receive whatever learning and growth such events have for us. Carolyn's reaction to the Welcoming Prayer was swift and clear: "Don't you dare tell me there is anything to be welcomed in this damn wheelchair or in the gaping wounds on my body that won't heal."

Friends, if we can't say "amen" to part of that lament, then we don't know the reality of suffering as Carolyn knew it.

But Carolyn's spiritual journey does not end on a defiant note of resistance. In Psalm 139 which we heard read, and which was read a couple years ago for Carolyn before her major leg surgeries at the Cleveland Clinic, we hear the assurance that God is present in whatever far-flung, impoverished, gloom-filled place we may find ourselves:

<sup>7</sup> Where can I go from your spirit? [the psalmist asks]

Or where can I flee from your presence?

<sup>8</sup> If I ascend to heaven, you are there;

if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

<sup>11</sup> If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,  
and the light around me become night,"

<sup>12</sup> even the darkness is not dark to you;

the night is as bright as the day,

for darkness is as light to you.

This Psalm holds the assurance that we will never be abandoned by God in our losses, crises, or even death. This is foundational Christian teaching – that God is with us in our unwelcomed and painful journeys. And it is also essential Christian teaching that such journeys are necessary for our growth and transformation. That's what the story of Jonah, of wondering in the wilderness, and of Jesus and the cross tell us. Franciscan Father Richard Rohr writes that "To avoid all loss, to avoid all letting go, is to avoid transformation into God, into union, into something more."

Meister Eckhart, the German theologian of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, puts it a slightly different way. He says that spirituality has much more to do with subtraction than it does with addition. Yet our culture, both secular and Christian, seems obsessed with addition: getting rich, becoming famous, earning gold stars with God or at the workplace or on social media. Jesus and the mystics tell us that the spiritual path is not about getting more or getting ahead, which only panders to the ego, but of letting go to what is false and temporary. As Jesus taught, "You must lose your life to find your life."

We don't generally let go to that false and limiting part of our self without some sort of great suffering, and even then not everyone will do the necessary inner work. But those who do, they make room for something new, beautiful, and holy. I believe this is the spiritual discovery Carolyn was making in the last months of her life, and it was transforming her.

Eleven weeks ago, on Thanksgiving Sunday, and the last time she addressed the congregation, Carolyn gave us a powerful and personal testimony. She confessed that after all the set-backs (personal and professional) and the never-ending physical calamities, she was seeing the chokehold of bitterness at work in her life. She noted that of the many narratives that could describe her life, she was hanging on to the one that said her reality was harsh and left her socially isolated. And in one sense that was unmistakably true. There was supporting evidence for this narrative to be found every day. But the byproduct of holding tight to that truth was, in Carolyn's words, "not a pleasant thing." Through the process of neuroplasticity, she explained to us, the brain reorders itself around what the mind is focused on. Focus on how awful life is, and life becomes more awful.

So Carolyn told us that she started to focus on the more positive realities in her life – her warm house, cupboards stocked with food, and income to maintain both. She gave her attention to her involvements that bring meaning; and especially to her caring community of friends, family, neighbors, and colleagues. Focusing on these things started forging new pathways in her brain. "It brings a mindful open-hearted approach to life," Carolyn told us; "rather than a narrow negativity."

She went on to point out that “What I’m talking about is a lifestyle, a worldview ... of gratefulness [which] stimulates my senses more, brings me more joy, and hopefully makes me an easier person to be around.”

Carolyn would be the first to admit that this spiritual discipline was not turning her into Mother Theresa. She was still wonderfully mischievous and feisty. But there’s also no question to me that it was transforming her. The focus and tenor of our conversations had changed.

Choosing gratitude until we become grateful is a kind of praying. It’s a way of praying that doesn’t change God’s mind or covet special favors from God; but it allows God to change our mind about the reality right in front of us. And what we find is that reality is steeped in love; that what may look like loss or death is in fact a radiance, a vastness of mercy and grace; and we come to know that no matter where we go; even when we come to the end; God is with us.

So Carolyn, when you asked me four nights ago if you could let go, the answer is not only that you can, but that you must. For letting go is not defeat, but the pathway to everlasting and abiding love. Go; dear, beloved Carolyn, and complete the beautiful transformation which you’ve been moving toward.

Amen.