



In celebration of the extraordinary life and legacy of Barbara Regan Whitman (2.25.34 - 12.25.24) | Saturday, January 4, 2025 | St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Hanover, MA | John (Revelation) 14:1-6; Psalm 23; Romans 14: 7-9; Psalm 121; John 6:37-40 | The Rev'd Amy Whitcomb Slemmer, Esq.

What a mixed blessing it is to gather and share stories and hymns and readings that were important to Barbara. To celebrate and grieve with her family, as her church family. We celebrate a life well lived and an extraordinary person and grieve because of who she was – a soul not likely to come our way again.

While this service is a gift offering insights to different sides of Barbara through family stories, friendly anecdotes and beautiful photos (and a great video we will all be treated to at her reception after this service). We are here to both celebrate and to attend to our individual and collective grief at the passing of such a stalwart in our community.

Barbara's remarkable life includes the unusual experience of expanding her footprint on the world as she aged. For so many of us, our worlds get smaller as we age, we whittle down our friend groups, reduce the places we travel or the lived experiences that we seek out week to week, month to month.

That was not my experience of Barbara's approach to her late '80s and her early 90's. Many of us found that we had to make an appointment well in advance before having the pleasure of her company at Benchmark, where if she wasn't the official Mayor, she was an extraordinary ambassador - (so grateful to have Benchmark tuned in with us this morning on-line!) What a joy it was at the appointed time to visit Barbara and find her holding court at Benchmark, surrounded by interesting people who were engaged in different parts of Barbara's life.

And she seemed to know and be known by everyone – people were eager to be at her elbow to hear a rye remark, or a quick review of a singing act or even a caregiver's approach to their work. It was a gift to spend time in Barbara's presence, not just because her free and available time was spread thin, but because she was always good for an anecdote – a lovely aside about

St. Andrew's or a bit of history about her family or this parish family or about some of the remarkable staff people who have worked at this ancient parish.

The frequent refrain around here was that Barbara was good at everything and everything that she undertook was remarkable. (In my experience this is often followed with a wistful or whispered - "I don't know how she does it!") What an extraordinary tribute to a long and productive life.

Barbara was among the gifts that I inherited in this community – having spent years with her daughter Joyce and son in law Keith and her beloved grandsons Ryan and Jason– the wonderful Conforti family first as a parishioner and then as a sponsored candidate for the priesthood at St. Stephens Cohasset.

Barbara shared a host of important gifts with me and would do anything for this church community that was the center of her life for so many years. She raised her children here, celebrated wedding anniversaries, life's milestones, and came to know and be known as part of the deep sustaining fabric of this parish.

Her final gift to me, and I hope to this community, is to have experienced a holy and profound death – one that was unexpected by her family, who enjoyed her company all Christmas Eve – fully herself surrounded by love and Christmas cheer for a long, celebratory and exceptional Christmas Eve. One that perhaps only she was aware was on her immediate horizon. And in her final hours, on her final day with us, her priority was to come to church on Christmas morning – and she did!

She turned our Christmas morning into a deeply reverent, profound experience as she made a swift and efficient transition from this life to her heavenly reward. Sandra brought her to church. Barbara took her time and was deliberate on our snowy ramp. She made it to the portico, could hear the music playing courtesy of HuiMin, she was being escorted by her loving daughter, and knowing Barbara, she didn't want to make a fuss – and she didn't.

She was loved and reminded of God's promises, even as she transitioned from our love and entered into God's expectant arms. What a privilege it is to have been with her during her swift ascent. Yet another gift.

All through the week between Christmas and New Years we heard about the beautiful Christmas cards that Barbara wrote, personalized and mailed to people here and beyond. We heard about the important conversations that Barbara engaged in, and her family blessed us with some of the plans that she made for her own service.

Barbara did not suffer. She made quick work of reuniting with the Choir of Angels, of being welcomed into God's outstretched arms. My prayers include my hope at Barbara's delight in showing up in heaven on the day we celebrate the baby Jesus' birthday – because spiritually speaking, they now have that date in common.

I can think of no one better to be associated with the most extravagant gift that God ever gave to us – a gift of such generosity that we really cannot fully grasp all facets or the depth of God's love for us in the birth of Christ. And, the gift and love and comprehensive presence of Barbara Whitman – who did everything she tried to do well.

I have no doubt that she's sorted out some of the unknown glitches in heaven. The place probably runs more smoothly based on Barbara's input, and eventually, one day, we too will benefit from her heavenly improvements.

Between now and then, her memory, her words, her gifts as an extraordinarily dedicated and faithful church woman will have to be talked about frequently, because she set a standard for love, for parenting, for participating, volunteering, teaching, nursing, visiting, praying, giving and doing, that was unparalleled.

Let's use Barbara's life and longtime contributions in so many facets of this world as teaching opportunities, and may we never forget that she did each of these extraordinary acts with a ready sense of humor and a marvelous laugh.

Just before the ambulance with Barbara aboard began its slow and quiet trip from here to the hospital, a guy dressed up in a full Santa suit – boots, belt, beard and all, ambled up to say “HO HO HO, Merry Christmas!” It was such a peculiar encounter and an odd juxtaposition in the moment of sadness, adrenaline, bewilderment and surprise – when he asked whether he might show himself to the person being transported in the ambulance, it took me about a nanosecond before the words came to me. I looked at Santa and assured him that Barbara was all set. In fact, she was having about the best Christmas we could imagine. Having waived Santa away from the ambulance, and wondering very briefly if I'd dreamed this whole thing up, I received this extraordinary sense of peace. From my toes to my finger tips, from my heart to the top of my head, I knew that all was well, and suddenly the contrast, and the unprecedented circumstances just bubbled out of me as a quick giggle - an echo of what I know would have struck Barbara as truly funny.

God bless Barbara in her new life, and may each of us support Barbara's family in this time of grief and adjustment. And if grief threatens to overshadow us, I know that I'll return to that image of Santa trailing after the ambulance where Barbara was undoubtedly enjoying the best Christmas present imaginable. Amen+

