

A Celebration of Life of Debra Bailey Gorden

Fr Jeff Hammond. *For there is nothing in life or in death, in the world that is, or in the world that shall be, nothing in all creation, that can separate us from God's love revealed to us in Yeshua (Jesus), the Christ.*

Invocation

Welcome, Welcome, Welcome. I welcome everything that comes to me in this moment because I know it is for my healing. I open to the love and Presence of God and the Divine's healing and grace within.

Memories

Johnny Gorden: delivered extemporaneously.

Tom Carnes: Let us begin -- with a very brief journey.

Debbie looked at me across the table; bit her lip and twirled her hair around her finger, with that look of trepidation in her eyes – the one that she had when she was not quite sure how something was going to go over.

She and I and a hand-full of adult lay theology students (we called them our “kids”) packed into a mere closet of a room.

I smiled, and nodded. She pressed “play.” Music filled the room. You know it; you may not know that Joni Mitchell, who Debbie loved, wrote it.

*Well, I came upon a child of God,
He was walkin' along the road,
And I asked him, 'Tell me where are you going?'
This he told me.*

As it came time for the refrain, I looked at her once again. She was now fully in the “Debbie zone” transfixed, transformed, confident; glowing. For a moment, we were all transported somewhere beyond ourselves.

*We are stardust, we are golden,
We are billion-year-old carbon,
And we've got to get ourselves
Back to the Garden.*

One more time, Debbie had crossed-over what she saw as the liquid boundary between the sacred and the profane—by profane I just mean common. And we were on another journey into God with Debbie leading the way.

Good afternoon. I am Tom Carnes. Debbie Gorden was, assuredly many different many things to each of us. For her, every relationship was a unique one. Every person was special. She was, of course, an adoring wife to her beloved Johnny, mother to *his kids* and hers alike, grandmother, caretaker, nurse, student, minister, hospice and hospital chaplain, and friend. That's part of the "*what*" that Debbie was. These are things most of you know.

And she conceived of God as one always seeking loving relationship with her -- and all of us. Debbie and God were intimate; like old friends -- there was Abba, Papa; her Yeshua, Jesus; and, of course, Sophia, the Holy Spirit as the divine feminine. Through her sharing that relationship with us -- the intimate friendship between Debbie and God -- she helped transformed many. I am going to call that the "*who*" Debbie was. And that is what I am going to mostly talk about. It is what, if anything, I might have some unique perspective on.

Debbie and I we were, more than anything theology buddies. Theology was not something we just talked about. It was something we *did*. It was what we did *together*.

She was my mentor; my spiritual director. My confidant. My protector. My friend. My little big sister in every sense of that word. We had a mutual admiration society. We loved one another.

I was Elisha to her Elijah. When it came time for her to leave the program we loved, Education for Ministry, she trusted me to carry her mantle. I hesitated; I was not nearly as sure as she was that I could grow into her role. She had lived into that role so perfectly.

When I was told Debbie asked that I speak today, I was more than a little nervous. Many of you could have been, to me, more obvious choices. Also, trying to capture Debbie is also a bit like roping the wind; she was so much to so many -- every relationship unique; no two person's experience of her the same.

I thought, maybe she asked me, in part, because she knew I would say nice things about her that she would never say herself. She saw the absolute best in others, but when it came to herself, Debbie never really understood what all of the fuss was about.

But anyone she chose would have come up here and said nice things about Debbie. Truth be told, she probably made many of us feel more "special" than was probably justified, me included. That was one of her gifts: making everyone she encountered feel like the most important, smart, witty, interesting, beautiful, lovable person that ever was

But I think, at bottom, Debbie asked me to speak to you today because she and I participated, mostly in a closet of a room on this campus, in part of one another's ever-continuing process of transformation into God. I believe that she thought that my unique vantage point as her traveling companion on that journey might provide me the perspective she was looking for.

But that presents yet another problem. I worried that what I have to say would not be interesting or entertaining enough. My experiences with Debbie seem rather like "Seinfeld;" "a show about nothing." Mostly we spent hours and hours in that closet of a room preparing for class, doing theology. How interesting could *that* be? It might seem as much "Groundhog Day" as "Seinfeld."

But then I got it. At least I hope that I did. In that little closet of a room, we talked about all the big issues of life, and death. We talked about the Ultimate. We *did* theology. And in doing so, we communed, together, with God. Something magical and transformational happened there. We each

allowed the other to see deep within us in love without fear, which, regrettably, doesn't happen nearly enough. So, I am persuaded that Debbie knew exactly what she was doing. Due to the nature of our relationship; there would be only one thing for me to talk about. I would not have to guess, or wonder. It would all become clear.

In talking about Debbie, as I said, there is the *what* she was, and the *who* she was. As to the "what" she was, I knew her primarily as a gifted teacher. For years, as I mentioned, she mentored our Education for Ministry Program here at Saint Barnabas, a challenging four-year lay theology program. Together with the late Tom Christopherson and with Richard Mickelson, Debbie also started the Wisdom School at this church, and taught classes in everything from the Gnostic Gospels – think the Gospel of Thomas and of Mary Magdalene --to the Enneagram. She also belonged to and participated in a religious Order. When she traveled, if not to see the grandchildren, it was often to a contemplative retreat somewhere, maybe even a silent one.

Part of "what" she was, for what seems like the whole time I knew her, was ill. Much of the time I knew Debbie she was having to come to terms with multiple illnesses and having to face her own mortality earlier than most. She accepted her illness with grace, *asking not "why me," by "why not me?"* I think it helped that she viewed God as a friend walking beside her and not one whose task it was to swoop down and heal her, although she would have liked that too. But that is not to say she did not receive healing; God's being with her for the journey had a profound healing effect on Debbie that you could see and that I bore witness to. And she never allowed the "what," the illness, to define "who" she was. In fact, throughout her illness, she continued to look after others, and to be concerned for them more than herself. When she called me a week or ten days before she died, it was because her Johnny told her I had been coming to the Tuesday noon healing service. She was worried, and she called to make sure Beverly and I were okay. She was astonished when I told her I was going to the healing service to pray for her Johnny, and not for us. She had never thought of that.

But at the core of "who" Debbie was, as I witnessed it, was a *woman of radical faith* – in God, of course, but because Debbie saw the interconnectedness of all things through God she had faith a radical faith in humanity as well. She was consciously engaged in growing day by day into unity with the Ultimate. To delve deeper into that journey, which I think defined who Debbie was, I have to talk a little bit about her theology – I promise to keep it short.

To start with, *the Biblical story was for Debbie the beginning, not the end. She saw it as a story pointing to God. A story that consistently sets our own cultural expectations and those of any other day on their ear. The meek are blessed. The poor are rich. The powerful are brought low. Miraculous things happen. The first are last; the last are first. We are to love our enemies until we love the enemy right out of them! The ideal model is not the rich, famous, or powerful, but the servant.*

Scarcity is a lie. Competition between us as humans and humans with the rest of creation for the goods of life is a perversion of God's dream. Love is the fuel of life and it grows infinitely and endlessly, but, ironically, only in its being freely and wastefully, given away. God is in us and, therefore in everyone – even in those people who are hard for us to like. Humans and humanity flourish when each puts the needs of others ahead of their own. Life is a process of growing deeper and deeper into God; theosis. The Kingdom of God, God's Dream for humanity, is not something in the future only, but is with us, in the here and now. You only have to decide to live there, and Debbie did.

Debbie believed that there was truth in all of the great religions, that they all pointed, albeit imperfectly, to the Ultimate. The Bible could point to that truth, but so could the sacred book of another religious

tradition, a poem, a painting, or even, as we began with, a pop song. Debbie found God right there in the middle of the everyday, at the intersection of the sacred and profane.

Now, as an EfM graduate and mentor -- that sounds like Biblical religion and a really positive theology. Unfortunately, it is not the prevalent theology that we encounter and is, indeed, rare enough to be called radical. It is not all tied up in doctrine and creeds, blame and shame. It points to a God who is relentless in pursuing relationships with us, to the point of coming to us to show us how it is done, and loving us, not punishing us, into the people God wants us to be. It's optimistic -- some would say overly so -- in its positive assessment of humanity. It promotes healthy relationships between all of creation, and a flourishing planet. It sounds like really Good News. So, why is Debbie's theology, her worldview, the exception rather than the rule?

Perhaps because it requires living it out and not just checking the right "belief" boxes. What drew me to Debbie, and what I believe drew others to her as well, is that she truly did her best, consciously and deliberately, to live it out; to walk the walk -- to follow what Jesus' early followers called The Way. She bought into God's dream and adopted it as her own. She trusted in the process of transformation. She gave herself away, over and over again, even when to do so entailed the risk of rejection and even when illness and the other challenges of life left her exhausted and wondering if she had anything more to give. When a door closed, she would simply adjust, and then look for the next open one. To the end, Debbie was on a mission; delighting in relationship.

Now, Debbie was, I think, exceptional in her consciousness of the Divine, and in swimming with God's current instead of against it, but she was not some kind of angelic being; she was just a totally authentic human being. More specifically, she was a totally authentic Debbie. She knew the secret: that by fully embracing her true Debbie-ness she was also living out God's dream for her. That's what human flourishing is all about. She understood her part in God's drama and embraced her role completely.

Part of her charm was, as I said, her blind spot: that she did not understand what all the fuss was about. She did not fully grasp who she was to others, me included. Debbie and I were meeting one day and talking about the challenges each of us were facing. She had recently visited her spiritual director, and had received some new clarity as a result. She suggested that I too needed a spiritual director. I just looked at her, and laughed. Did she really not know that she was that, among other things, to me? Recently, she talked of this day, her funeral, and expressed that it would be a small affair -- perhaps *twenty* of us would come. She clearly had a blind-spot, but if you have to have a blind-spot, excessive and naïve humility and modesty would seem to be a good one to have. They are virtues after all.

Debbie *was modest*, and kind, gentle, and patient, all those things. She was a conciliator, who generally avoided conflict. But, make no mistake, Debbie could be formidable and was no doormat. She had a quiet, gentle, yet firm way of fighting for what, and who, she believed in; a way that was itself disarming.. You wanted Debbie on your side, and her side was generally the more righteous one in any event.

She had a way about her that made her hard to say no to. She had a gift of getting you to do what she wanted you to do, and leaving you thinking it was your own idea. As but one example, I intended to give up mentoring EfM when she left, in 2017; I could not imagine doing it without her, and I honestly did not believe I could pull it off by myself. She played along with this for weeks; all the while secretly placing her bet that I simply could not bear to see the program we had built end. I honestly do not think she worried about it for five minutes, although she never argued with me or tried to convince me to stay. She knew what I would do well before I did. And how could I have ever thought that I could reject the mantle when it was Debbie handing it to me, anyway?

But Debbie's defining attribute, and the only fitting place to end, I think, was the way she *loved*. Through Debbie's eyes, we all looked better than through our own. She saw us, not as we see ourselves, but closer to how I imagine God sees us. I think if we could see ourselves through those eyes there would be a lot of healing.

In the end, I think Debbie invited me here today to tell you that she loves you, us, like nobody's business, that we, you and me, are *indeed stardust* and we are *indeed golden*. That she saw the God in each of us and knows that it is there. That, through connection and relationship with the Ultimate we can cultivate that seed and grow it. That we are perfectly made. And that we are all interconnected with one another and with all of God's exuberant creation. That the Dream of God is not just about the future. That it is meant to be fully experienced here, and now. Doing God's work. Feeding God's sheep. Loving one another.

I believe Debbie is still urging all of us, as she did that day in our class, to get back to the Garden – to live into God's dream for us. And Debbie's hard to say no to, if not downright irresistible. She has a track record of getting her way, and a history of doing God's bidding. So, I suggest, we give into it; we live into it; we give into it; we live into it; that we just get on with it. Thank you.

Readings: Robert Russo. *We are a fearful people, we are afraid of conflict, war, an uncertain future, illness and most of all death. This fear takes away our freedom. When we can reach beyond our fears to the One who loves us with a love that was there before we were born and will be there after we die, then oppression, persecution and even death will be unable to take our freedom. (Fr. Henri Nouwen)*

Bell – St. Barnabas' African bell

Psalm 63:1—8 , congregation in unison, led by Fr Bur Dobbins

*O God, you are my God, I seek you,
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.
So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory.
Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.
So I will bless you as long as I live;
I will lift up my hands and call on your name.
My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast,
and my mouth praises you with joyful lips
when I think of you on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night;
for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.
My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.*

Bell: Debbie's #2 small

Robert Russo *If God said, "pay homage to everything that has helped you enter my arms," there would not be one experience of life, not one thought, not one feeling, not one act, I would not bow to. (Rumi)*

Bell: Debbie's #1 large

Lord's Prayer: Fr. Bur

Invocation: Fr. Bur

O God, O Sovereign over all, transcendent source of everything, your Name above all else, has stamped creation with the image of your face.

For everyone and everything are held by you in close embrace, your loving care encompasses the world. We raise one voice to you in praise for all that is.

We bless the name of the One who permeates the world, whose Presence fills it till the end of time.

Bell: Debbie's bell #2

The Eucharist: New Zealand Creed/Responses: Invocations pg. 181.

Fr. Jeff

*You, O God, are supreme and holy,
You created our world and give us life,
Your purpose overarches everything we do.
You have always been with us.
You are God.*

Fr. Bur

*You breathe...and we are brought to existence.
You breathe "be"...and we feel the artistry from your hand moving throughout the cosmos.
You breathe...and glory flashes out as fire across creation's face.
A world choked on thorns dissolves in your compassionate breath, and the shroud is torn away from the stone-cold corpse of our humanity.*

Fr. Jeff

*You O God, are infinitely generous,
Good beyond all measure.
You came to us before we came to you.
You have revealed and proved
Your love for us in Jesus Christ,
who lived and died and rose again.
You are God.*

Fr. Bur

*So, in this desert journey of heart and soul, You call to us that we might hear and come, trust we might see and be.
For you bear with us our wounds in time. This mix of pain and joy is Yours and ours.*

*So taking us and all in flesh, you made us one with you, and you with us and everything that is, your full circle of embrace. You lived and died as one of us. You rose again beyond this earth to carry us and your creation back to you.
You are with us now.
You are God.*

Fr. Jeff

*You, O God are Holy Spirit.
You empower us to be your gospel in the world
You reconcile and heal; you overcome death.
You are our God. We worship you.*

Fr. Bur

So now, forgiveness and compassion flow to cleanse the world of its separation from You. So now, your Presence lives in us through deep remembrance.

Bell: St. Barnabas'

Fr. Jeff:

*We take and eat,
We lift and drink this praying that your Spirit fills each of us.*

Bell: Debbie's bell Large #1

*May God's bread nourish you.
May God's wine flow through to you.*

Blessing: Fr Jeff

May the Ocean of Love and Mercy be your comfort and your strength. May Infinite Compassion be your hope and support. May the Friend be your light and your pathway, and the blessing of God – Creator, Restorer and Giver of Life – remain with you now and forever.

Bell: Debbie's #1&2 Large and small

Dismissal: Fr Jeff

Go forth into the world in peace, be strong and of great courage, hold fast to that which is true and beautiful and good, Love and serve God and all earth's creatures with singleness of heart, rejoice in the power of the Spirit that is yours, And the Peace of God – who is Father and Mother, Son and Sacred Spirit – be with you now and always. Amen

Committal: Mary Obermite

*On the day I die, when I am being carried toward the grave, don't weep.
Don't say, "She's gone! She's gone!"
Death has nothing to do with going away.
Does setting cause any harm to the sun or the moon?
The sun sets and the moon sets, but they're not gone.
Death is a coming together.
Meeting and union will be mine forever.
The tomb looks like a prison, but it is really a release into Union.
The human seed goes down in the ground like a bucket into the well where Jesus is.
It grows and comes up again full of some unimaginable beauty.
Your mouth closes here and immediately opens there with a shout of joy.*

*Blessed are the dead who die in God, for they now rest from their labors. May Debbie's soul, and the souls of all the departed through the mercies and compassion of God our Maker, rest in peace.
Amen*

Go now in peace.

Be strong and of good courage.

Hold fast to that which is good.

Love and serve God with singleness of heart, rejoicing in the power of God's Spirit.

And the peace of God which passes all our understanding keep you and guard you, and remain with you always. Amen