

# Meditation on the Life of Sally Ross

## April 28, 2014

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Presented by Catherine Williams

This morning we have gathered to pay our last respects to one incredible person. We may be different in our relationships to Sally, but I think it safe to say we are united in our love and regard for her, united in a common sense of having lost someone quite valuable, quite precious. It was this past Wednesday that I responded to a phone call that took me on a mission of duty to the hospital. Hyosang Park, our music director, went with me. We met Charles and a dear neighbor there with Sally; Claire was on her way, trying to get past infuriating drivers in her path. What started for me as a call to pastoral duty, soon turned into a most sacred honor as we watched Sally take those final precious breaths to the end. It was such a dignified exit – peaceful and composed. She was, in the end, surrounded by neighbors family, friends, and the hymns and scriptures that marked her faith.

Faith was a huge component of Sally's life. The words under her picture on the bulletin cover were among the last words she heard as she slipped into eternity. *Those who live in the shelter of the Most High will find rest in the shadow of the Almighty.* (Psalm 91:1 NLT) It seemed all too soon for her to go. I understand she comes from a family of people known to live well into their eighties and nineties. She herself had not planned on making an exit this early, but there was one aspect of her faith that steadied her even in those last shaky moments. I'll tell you what it was by way of referring to the beautiful obituary her family composed.

According to her obituary, "Sally was committed to building a supportive church community. She was an active member of the PUMC,

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sang soprano for the choir, served on numerous committees, assisted with countless fundraisers and did practically everything but preach.” It is this last phrase – *did practically everything but preach* - that I find interesting. I am currently a third year doctoral student of Homiletics (preaching) at Princeton seminary, and one of the things I have constantly wrestled with in my study is a working definition of preaching that I find satisfactory. I’m thinking of this dictum that has been dubiously attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi that says, “Preach the gospel at all times and when necessary use words.” On that basis, I *do* think that Sally did a little preaching herself.

In her obituary Sally is quoted as saying, “I learned a long time ago that being there for your loved ones is the most important thing you can do.” Being there was a trait Sally mastered. She was there for her husband Charles, there for her girls and Andrew, there for her extended family, there for her neighbors and friends, she was there for us - her church family. I couldn’t help but think of her life as a parable of God’s own presence with us as I reflected what the Psalmist says about God in Psalm 139: *Where can I go from your Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.* Sally’s “being there” - her faithful presence - preached the good news of God’s attentiveness and abiding presence in the lives of God’s people. This was the divine presence that steadied her in her final moments; it was her escort across that threshold of eternity.

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But there's one other message Sally preached that quilters and crafters may comprehend more easily. Again Psalm 139 is my reference point because the Psalmist speaks of a God who is involved in the details of our lives. The Psalmist reflects, "*For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.*" It was as though the Psalmist could see God leaning over a masterpiece, working with deft, nimble hands to create a unique, one-of-a-kind person – right from the womb. Anyone of the unique, one-of-a-kind quilts or handmade shawls and garments made by Sally is a picture that paints a thousand words of God's intimate, creative involvement in our lives and indeed in the world. Yes, I would contend that Sally did everything in church, including a little preaching. She may have found this notion hilarious, but she did. She proclaimed the unconditional love of God through her friendships. She proclaimed the wisdom of God through her timely counsel. She proclaimed the steadfastness of God through her persistence and resilience in her fight with cancer. She proclaimed the peace of God, even in her dying.

As Christian preachers our job is to point people to God, not so much to ourselves. So as we celebrate the life of Sally, let us lift our eyes to the God of whom she witnessed so eloquently. The God who was, who is, and who is to come. The God of whose presence we are assured in life and in death. The God, who, if we believe the words of Scripture, has prepared a place for us, an eternal home which the apostle John describes as *a new heaven and a new earth, where the home of God is among mortals. He will*

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*dwelt with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for behold, says God, "I will make all things new."*

It is the Christian belief and hope that death is but a doorway through which we pass from this imperfect life to an unblemished and eternal existence in the presence of the God who has been with us from the womb. I commend you to this God today, the God in whose arms our beloved Sally has found rest. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.