

FUNERAL SERMON

2 TIMOTHY 4:-6-8 Shara Purpura (4-23-10)

Rev. Michael C. Blackwell

Outward appearances really can be deceiving. A majestic rolling ocean wave can hide a deadly undertow or rip current. A beautiful, elaborately landscaped house can disguise the pain of an angry, divided and dysfunctional family that lives inside that home. A creepy, ugly caterpillar gives no evidence that it is a precursor of a magnificently beautiful butterfly. Yes, appearances *can* be deceiving!

And certainly that was true of your dear mother and grandmother...our dear sister in the faith, Shara Purpura...appearances certainly *were* deceiving! You see, Shara was a fighter!

Certainly no one could have looked *less* like a fighter than she did. When we think of fighters, we probably think of heavily muscled men with bloody noses swollen lips and black eyes whose appearance and attitude emote a sense of belligerence and animosity.

When I think of Shara, the fighter, there is not an image that can be much different than that. She was diminutive, stooped over from the arthritis that so crippled her body; she walked with a limp and her fingers were curled into her hands. She spoke with a soft voice that never lost the southern accent she brought with her to live here. She had a gentle manner and you always had a sense that she genuinely wanted to help whoever she could in whatever way was possible.

But all of those outward appearances only covered the incredible strength she brought to every battle. For as much pain and disability as the arthritis brought her, it never interfered with her determination to be a faithful wife, a loving mother, grandmother and great-grandmother, a caring and concerned friend. When in recent months she was attacked by a new affliction and infection she fought and fought against that as well, until finally this past Sunday she lost that battle.

Surely Shara fought the good fight. But today we gather to assure one another and to proclaim to anyone that will listen, that we can add to Shara's story the words that St. Paul wrote to his young friend, Timothy, about himself as he neared the end of his life when he said that he had "fought the good fight..." With Paul, Shara has also finished the race, she has kept the faith!

For it has been Shara's strong and consistent faith—even in the midst of great pain and crippling disease, even though suffering disappointments and limitations...it has been her faith that has been an inspiration and example for all of us. She could keep going with such determination because she knew and believed what we sometimes doubt—that the presence of Jesus in our lives is the only thing that in the end really counts...and it is that presence of Jesus that can and will sustain us in every trouble.

That is why her relationship with this church was such an important part of her life. It was here she received her adoption into God's family in the washing of Holy Baptism. It was here she was assured of her forgiveness and strengthened in her faith as she was fed her Lord's Body and Blood in his holy Supper. It was here she brought her children to meet Jesus. It was here she served her Lord in many ways and enjoyed the fellowship of her family of faith. In fact when she moved to North Carolina several years ago it was leaving this place of faith behind that caused her the most sadness. It was here she got her training to carry on the fight.

To be sure there were times that Shara had trouble seeing Jesus as she waged the battle... sometimes as she tried to peer over the arthritis and its crippling effects she had trouble seeing Jesus. Sometimes as she tried to look around all of the medications and treatments she had

trouble seeing Jesus. Sometimes as she tried to rise above the frustration and the discouragement she had trouble seeing Jesus. But Jesus never had trouble seeing her. She didn't even have to be able to get up to see him because he climbed up a tree for her...the tree of the cross. And looking down from that cross Jesus saw her clearly, washed her in the water of baptism, called her his own child. And then again and again he fed her with his Supper to strengthen her for the journey. And now, in heaven she can see Jesus clearly with none of those distractions to interfere.

So Shara fought the good fight. She has finished the race. And now she has claimed the crown of righteousness that her Lord had awaiting her. So, in spite of all appearances to the contrary, this description of Shara, the fighter, is an apt description. But it is also a description that can be deceptive if we are not careful.

For to talk about fighting the good fight and finishing the race is to envision an individual accomplishment. Shara would have told us it wasn't *her* fighting the good fight after all—any more than a soldier in battle fights alone. It is the unity of the squadron or battalion that gives the soldier his strength for the battle.

If Shara had been fighting the battles she fought in life with disease and pain and discouragement alone, she would have given up long ago. What made it possible for her to fight this battle and win was not some inner strength that she had that no one else had. Her power came from the love of Christ shown in his death on the cross and his resurrection from the grave for her where, in taking her place, he bore the punishment for her sin and won for her the gift of eternal life, and her power came from his love that flowed through her and enabled her to do far more than she could ever have done herself.

That love of Christ came to Shara through God's Word and Sacrament, but it also came through the people that God sent her—especially her family! For through all of her sickness and her pain, through all of the setbacks she encountered along the way, the thing that renewed her again and again was her concern for, her interest in and her love for her husband, her children, her grandchildren and her great-grandchildren. Time and again it was her family that was God's instrument of giving her life and hope. It is because God used his Word and his Supper and his people to work faith in Shara...it is because of that we say we come here today to celebrate a victory and not to mourn a loss!

For that faith God gave to Shara led her early Monday morning to join all of God's saints who have gone before her in claiming the final victory as she joined God in heaven. Shara knew what lay ahead of her. She was ready because she had heard God's promise to her at baptism and she believed. And now she is enjoying everything Jesus had promised her in heaven, a place where she no longer has to fight and struggle...a place where she no longer has to endure pain and disability...a place where she shares life eternal with all the saints who have gone before her there.

So, as we gather in this place today to remember Shara, to grieve her loss and celebrate her life, there is no more appropriate thing for us to do than to celebrate her faith—her faith and ours—a faith fueled by God's love that strengthens us to fight the battles and a faith which gives victory over everything that can come our way—even death!