

Inspiring the Family of God
in honor of Barton Warren Shackelford

Church of Our Saviour, Mill Valley, California

by the Rev. Richard E. Helmer
July 18th, 2007

It is a commonly held, but often unarticulated assumption that clergy are supposed to be model Christians for the people they serve. Of course, if truth be told, we hold such assumptions at our own peril!

But what is less well-known is that there are members of the Christian community whose leadership and example inspire the clergy and, indeed, all the People of God. Bart was one of these. His remarkable strength of mind and indomitable spirit combined with an unwavering generosity made him an inspiration to so many.

The legacy that Bart leaves us is hard to overstate. Even in his most frail moments, he was a giant among us, bearing considerable responsibility on his broad shoulders. From councils of this parish and the greater community, to the Board of Trustees at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific in Berkeley, to the leadership of one of the largest utility companies in the country, hardly a day nor even a moment goes by that each of us doesn't benefit in some way from Bart's presence and work among us over many years. In fact, much of what we take for granted is a result of his labor in leading countless others in keeping the essentials of our world running.

Yet even more striking to me is this:

Having had the privilege of getting to know Bart and his family over the past year, I have always found him to be unassuming. Having a distinguished career like his might go to most people's heads! But not Bart. Somehow and wonderfully it was never about him. It was about the people he loved, his amazing family and long marriage to the beloved Charlaine, his beautiful children and grandchildren, the communities he served, and all the good purposes he saw through to their fruition. And it was about the grace of God moving through a long, steady, faithful life. Bart was forever pointing to a greater purpose, whether it was a love of being alive, a love of community, a reverence for learning, or simply seeking truth – with a good deal of humor at all times, of course!

By simply being here, he called out the best in everyone. If there was a storm, Bart was the calm in the midst of it. If there was reason to be upset, Bart could bring everything back into perspective with an ounce of wisdom and a chuckle. He could with almost equal grace lead a corporation or serve the Church, listen to great music, play cards with his grandchildren, or befriend the least of us. Getting to know Bart for the first time felt to me like getting to know an old friend. That's the sort of person he was.

He was, for whatever foibles he had as a human being, a saint among us. In his late years in this community of faith his was a treasured, almost timeless presence. Parishioners have remarked to

me over the last week how his passing shifts the foundations here and leaves a great void. How his manner was that of a true gentleman – a rarity in these days. . . really a rarity in any day – and he was an almost unassailable Christian. . . one who seemed to embody the essential teachings of Christ simply by *being who he was best called to be* amongst the People of God. Bart lived and died with both dignity and humility rooted in the giving of self that pointed straight towards the Spirit of compassion, life, and love. And he understood something in his bones – almost beyond words – about the nature of the human family, all made in the image of God.

Look around for a moment at the faces of friends, family, and colleagues – all of us who knew and loved Bart as we served alongside him. So many of us were touched by the hospitality he, Charlene, his children and grandchildren have shown. Bart and his family value the deep human need for connection, and Bart carried this value from his home life to wherever he was. We are the greatest witness to his best and lasting legacy – one that he has given to his children and grandchildren, his church, his community, and his friends. Through his life, he has reminded us that across all barriers of class, creed, and ancestry resides a simple but profound truth: simply that we belong to one another. Bart, in a way only he could, drew us in and nurtured us as the Family of God. He looked after our well-being and called us into real, steadfast relationship with each other. And there are few gifts or legacies greater than this.

The void we may feel in Bart's absence today is slowly changing to reveal a deeper sense that he somehow and remarkably continues with us in a new way. Bart's family in his final hours talked of encounters with him in dreams, in memory, and through his last gift given – even after he was no longer conscious – one of bringing his family together in prayer and love as he made a dignified and peaceful journey into the arms of God's grace.

The greatest mystery of the faith tradition many of us share with Bart is the Resurrection. No one dares talk about how it works, and few dare to speculate on what it might ultimately look like. But I am as certain as I can be certain about anything that Bart's insatiable curiosity and steadfast desire to live with abundant generosity – a true definition of faith that sets an example for all of us – that this way of life has led him beyond death into the heart and life of God. Indeed, it seems only right that he be among the first of us found by Christ and raised up.

With the honor of walking with Bart and his family in these last days, I have been at times overwhelmed with a desire I have rarely felt. However heaven looks or feels, or however transformed this life becomes as it moves towards the center of God's love for all the universe – I know one thing this day in my heart. A reason now I want to be in heaven, to be called among God's children, is because Bart is there. And that is a blessing indeed – a legacy and an inspiration left by this saint for generations of the Family of God.

Amen.