

Homily for the Burial of the Dead, November 23, 2019

Carol Ann Osuchowski Selle, 1932–2019

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Lamentations 3:22–26, 31–33; Psalm 23; 1 John 3:1–2; John 10:11–16

When I met Carol Selle, I was in graduate school at the University of Chicago. Carol was Mrs. Selle to me at that time, the close friend of another remarkable woman I had the privilege to know, Elizabeth—Betsey—Bobrinskoy. Her son Charlie and his wife Mary Anne and two of their sons are here. After seminary, ordination, and work in Dallas and Baton Rouge, in 1988 I became rector of a parish in Michigan City, Indiana—on Lake Michigan, on the border of the State of Michigan—not far from Carol and Richard Selle’s house in the amazing lakeshore dunes on the southern and western shores of Lake Michigan.

While in Michigan City, I came to know another remarkable woman in Carol’s world, Georgia Watson Craven. While I was away, my predecessor in Michigan City, Father Robert Center, officiated at Richard Selle’s funeral. One of the blessings of being called to Saint Mary’s was to know Mrs. Selle as Carol for over twenty years. And let me mention here her wonderful and gracious companion Elizabeth Aguilera, whose

spirit is every bit as generous as Carol's—and I'm happy to see Georgie with us too.

It's was a great privilege to enjoy Carol's company, to be a guest in her home, to listen to music in her salon, to eat at her table, and to have had her as a guest in my home. She had a very clear sense of herself. She respected principles. She liked to laugh. In the last few years, when I visited with her occasionally she wanted to speak to me about God.

One of my own heroes is Theodore Parker, who was a Unitarian minister—and one of the Massachusetts Transcendentalists. He was a leading Abolitionist, one of the six men who funded John Brown's raid on the Armory and Arsenal at Harper's Ferry. Parker died in 1860 in Florence, Italy, and is buried there. He and his wife had gone to Italy because of his tuberculosis.

He was also a published and widely read preacher. Abraham Lincoln drew on Parker's words—"of all the people, by all the people, for all the people"—for the Gettysburg Address. Martin Luther King, Jr., drew on these words Parker wrote for several speeches and sermons: "I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little

ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.”

With Carol—for Carol—I borrowed from Parker, too: “The arc of God’s creation is a long one, and it bends towards mercy and kindness, for God is merciful and kind.” Carol welcomed reassurance of God’s mercy and kindness.

Someplace in my library is a copy of a small textbook written back in the day for University of Chicago undergraduates. It’s called, “Learning to Look.” Carol, in so many ways, had learned over the course of her life, how to look and to listen clearly—art, music, people, and life.

After the death in September 2017 of the mother of another friend from the decade of my twenties, I found myself writing a note to my friend without really thinking, just writing. I wrote that since the death of my own parents, though I do feel separated from them, I don’t think they feel separated from me. That was a new understanding for me. With respect, I think there’s a straight line for this perspective from Moses

to Jesus when Jesus reminds people that, when the God spoke to Moses at the burning bush, God said, “‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?’ He is not God of the dead, but of the living.”¹

Today’s gospel lesson from John is the continuation of the story of my favorite New Testament narrative, Jesus’ healing of the man born blind.² In this narrative, before and after the man can see, he is rejected by his parents, his community, and his religious leaders. Jesus responds to leaders who for whatever reason, have not, if you will, learned to look with compassion on the man who now can see, says to those who think they can see, “I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd.”³

¹ Mark 12:26–27.

² John 9:41.

³ John 10:14–16.

With respect to everyone here of whatever tradition, I think these words speak to the love all of us have known in this life and the mercy and kindness and hope of the life of the world to come.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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