

We come together today as people of God to mourn and to remember Carrie McCullough, loving mother, devoted daughter, beloved sister, loyal friend, precious partner, and fierce lover of life in all of its variety, its complexity, and its mystery. We come with shock, with disbelief, with anger and sadness, with unanswered questions, with regret, and with a knocked-down on-your-knees brokenness looking for some glimpse of salvation in a tragic event that is both all too familiar and all too surreal. We come here, to St. Anne's, because Carrie and her brother Keith grew up here with this church family. Carrie received her first communions here as a young child, and then later as an adolescent made her own commitment to her faith at Confirmation. The fourth pew from the front on this side bears a plaque of dedication to two of her grandparents. And family is family—loving, nurturing, essential and complicated. I am relatively new to Tifton compared to so many of you, and was not blessed to have known Carrie during any of her fast and furious 37 years on this earth; yet as an adopted member of this church family, I can tell you that it has been an honor and a privilege to have met those who knew and loved her. Through their eyes I have seen a sister in Christ who has in a short couple of days taught me much about living large and loving well, about strength and determination and selflessness, and about family.

Carrie was beautiful, her smile radiating out of a long mane of curls in the pictures her family and friends have shared. These spontaneous snaps are infused with energy, showing a woman vivacious, intense, alive. Carrie has been described as one of those people who was taller than life, though her natural height did not dissuade her from wearing high heels, with the emphasis on *high*. She was positive, and was rarely caught talking trash about other people. She had a kind heart, and would drop everything to help someone who needed her, whether she had met them yet or not. She had a special radar for people in trouble, and her heart was easily melted by her gift of compassion. Carrie was loyal to her friends and her family, ready put her needs on hold to answer a someone else's. She had a gift of making *everyone* feel accepted and special, not realizing how special that gift of inclusion made her.

Carrie was a free spirit, with the emphasis on *free*. An explorer. An adventurer. She was the child who did not want her hand held by a parent

trying to keep her safe. She would wander away from the house as young as three, usually to be found “messing up a tree” or hiding out in the tree house—always somewhere she was not supposed to be. When she was older, Carrie was the one to sneak out of the house and get away with it—telling the tale of it long past any statute of limitations on punishment. She did things *her* way, marched to her own drummer, danced to her own music, and yet she was always folding other people into her world, making friends wherever she went. When Carrie was 14 she flew alone to New York and made friends on the plane with an entire professional basketball team. On a more recent trip to New York for a Thanksgiving vacation, Carrie, along with her Mom and her daughters found themselves in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy. That did not deter Carrie, who wanted to make the most of the experience for her kids, who had been promised a visit to the Cake Boss Bakery in Hoboken, New Jersey. There was no easy public transportation because the subways were still flooded and the city was a mess. So, clearly against her Mother’s wishes, decided she and the kids would take a cab to taste those famous Hoboken cannolis—a *cab* from Manhattan to Hoboken. This was a problem solved to Carrie, but the side order of risk left her Mom anxious and worried. Later that same day Darlene hailed a cab for another destination and when questioned about her fretting by the driver, she began to tell him about her daughter’s foolhardy adventure. The cab driver said, “Are you talking about Carrie? She’s fine! I dropped them off at their hotel already. They had a great time!” On the trip to Hoboken and back, Carrie and the cab driver had become fast friends, and knew everything important about each other by the end of the fare. She never met a stranger she couldn’t turn into a friend.

Carrie was a passionate lover of the natural world. She braked for everything, including trash on the side of the road. She recycled. She was obsessive about eating a healthy diet and declared herself a vegetarian at age 13 and was for many years afterwards. Carrie cared madly about vegetables, organic farming, animals, the earth, the oceans, and evolving environmental science, which she had studied in college. She deplored junk food and might have been called a “health nut” by some of the people who loved her. Her passion for good and healthy food for her children was one of her expressions of love for them. When the real world intruded with its fast and processed temptations, she guarded their growing bodies like a she-tiger, and was known to lecture her physician father about his food choices, telling him he should know better than to go for the barbeque.

Carrie was tough. A fierce woman. She could give as good as she got and then some. Her Mom describes teaching her big brother to be gentle with his little sister until she had to change her tune and give him permission to defend himself when needed. To defend someone she cared about, or a cause that was important to her, or an underdog, Carrie could kick butt and take names. She was fiercely independent and would try to do things herself before she asked for help. She worked tirelessly to provide for her children—willing to do whatever was needed to keep them safe and secure. That she could not always make them happy was something she struggled with, because as even as Carrie’s world grew over her life with new people she loved, her girls always came first in her heart.

Carrie was a deeply spiritual person, believing in something bigger than herself, in a oneness in all of creation, in a purpose in her life that went beyond her own wants and desires. From the stories I have heard about Carrie’s compassion for friend and stranger, she would have had to be drawing from a deep well of God’s love to be such a tireless giver. And this makes Carrie a teacher, to all of us. Somehow in her short and interrupted life she managed to understand what it means to live an uncompromising life of love. Taking on the risks and the challenges of it, the messy complications of it, and the cost of going for broke, Carrie lived a life of love.

So how do we mortals deal with the abrupt and wrenching loss of someone so full of life? Carrie was one of those people whose light burns so hot and brilliant, that it can be blinding. When a light like that goes out, the darkness blinds us too for a while, making it hard to find the way back to an almost unbearably ordinary life without Carrie in it. How is it even possible to grasp the absence of her?

The only way I know is this. First: keep breathing. Breathe in the creation in all its glory and gift, and live in gratitude for its infinite variety of wonders and its life-sustaining bounty. Seek healing in the beauty and peace of nature. Take time to soak in the birdsong at sunrise, the power of a thunderstorm, the magic of the night stars. Next: struggle to stay open—open to the pain of loss, and open to the deep richness of life when it is full of compassion for others. Then: love and let yourself be loved by your family—in whatever complicated blended combinations of generations and adoptions and distant cousins and friends near and far and church and community that are family to you. Finally: walk by faith and not by sight. We cannot claim to know the mind of God. We seek God’s will and purpose

for our lives but that does not mean we must accept that Carrie's accident and death were God's will—because God is not in the business of causing us suffering. As we heard earlier in our reading from the ancients in the Book of Lamentations:

Although he causes grief, he will have compassion  
according to the abundance of his steadfast love;  
for he does not willingly afflict  
or grieve anyone.

God is in the business of loving—of loving us and loving others through us. We know this because we are Resurrection people, believing in the power of the forgiveness of sins through the saving work of Jesus Christ, the death overcoming One. When we walk by faith in God who creates, redeems and sustains, then we have no choice but to walk in love. As long as we live in our earthly tent, as St. Paul calls our beautiful, vulnerable and transient bodies, we are called to lives of love—fierce, uncompromising, self-sacrificing, loyal, challenging, rich and deep and crazy love. In her death Carrie has reminded us that life is always too short, and we do not have much time to gladden the hearts who travel with us.

In her life Carrie has taught us to make the most and best of it—living and loving, fiercely. May she rest in the peace that passes all understanding. And may those who mourn her passing be showered with every comfort, grace and blessing. AMEN