

Homily for the Funeral of Stephen Balog 2020

To Florence, Steve's wife of 48 years, all family members and friends... you have our loving support during this time of sadness and grief.

Steve Balog was a man filled with the Holy Spirit. He always struck me as a PROPHET in the very best sense of that word, a man who was driven by a real and genuine thirst for GOD'S JUSTICE for every human being. He had a nearly unconscious and wide-ranging gift for being in touch with the fundamental needs of the human mind, body, and spirit. He did this through his vast reading, correspondence, and contacts with a whole variety of people, and the constant conversations that he had with his wife Florence, who shared these passions. An image that keeps coming to mind for me, so descriptive of Steve, is that of Micah, a Prophet from the Old Testament. A favorite Scripture text attributed to Micah is this: *This is what the Lord asks of you: act justly, love tenderly, and walk humbly with your God.* Though considered by Scripture scholars as a "minor prophet," living and working in the time of Isaiah, he is noted for his emphasis on Justice. One Scripture commentator said: *Injustice shows itself, according to Micah, primarily in three activities: in coveting what belongs to others, in perverting justice, and in hypocritical religiosity.* Justice, love, humility: All of these were very near and dear to Steve in his life and in his work. Injustice, covetousness, and hypocritical religiosity were his bane.

This leads very naturally into the reading from the Prophet Isaiah that Steve chose for his funeral.

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; He has sent me to bring good news to the afflicted, to bind up the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives, release to the prisoners, To announce a year of favor from the LORD and a day of vindication by our God; To comfort all who mourn; to place on those who

mourn in Zion a diadem instead of ashes, To give them oil of gladness instead of mourning, a glorious mantle instead of a faint spirit.

These verses Jesus himself proclaims from the scroll in the synagogue at the beginning of his ministry in Nazareth. Jesus rolls up the scroll and says, these words are fulfilled in your hearing. As you saw in Steve's obituary, in his early years Steve was a member of the Passionist order and ordained a priest in 1959. After studies in Louvain, Belgium, and in the headiness of what the Church was experiencing after Vatican II Steve asked permission of Rome to set aside his priestly vocation and later met and married Florence Gebke. One could almost say that it was a vocation within a vocation. Steve had offered his life and love to God to serve, and now it took a slightly different path. He continued to offer his life and love to God as husband through his covenant of marriage with Florence and then as loving and supportive father to his two adopted daughters Evelyn and Sharon. That same offering of life and love coupled with his zeal for justice and loving concern for all also became his life's work and means of supporting his family.

Steve's time right after leaving religious life was working with Mayor Cervantes in St. Louis. Those were tense years in the late sixties, early seventies. A lesson Steve learned there from Mayor Cervantes was the commitment to dialog. Mayor Cervantes and the City of St. Louis committed themselves to talking through many of the racial and economic disparity issues that tore other communities apart and resulted in rioting and destruction. St. Louis had far less of this than elsewhere.

Steve worked in Adult Foster Care Program with the Aging Services Department of Oregon for many years. He coupled that work with his prayer and worship at St. Andrew's in Portland. For those of you who don't know the history of that Catholic parish, it is a community which has had very prophetic leadership. Fr. Bert Griffin and later Fr. Bob Krueger were some of the most outstanding. It is a community that is very comprehensive in linking worship to social justice and inclusiveness on all levels and with all peoples. It is really quite an amazing community to this day. Florence and Steve and their daughters

Evelyn and Sharon became part of that community, with Evelyn and Sharon being baptized and received into the Catholic Church at the Easter Vigil with Fr. Bert Griffin.

Steve belongs to the Welcome Committee at St. Andrew's. It was through this small group at St. Andrews (because Fr. Krueger said each needed a special mission), that Steve and Florence, began working for and teaching folks about welcoming gay and lesbian persons. Their daughters came out as lesbian, and through this experience, Florence and Steve felt called to give presentations to groups and especially parents of gay and lesbians on the American Bishops' document, ALWAYS OUR CHILDREN. It was a work that Steve and Florence brought here to Mt. Angel and the Shalom Center when they moved to the Towers and became members of St. Mary's Parish.

St. Paul's Letter to the Galatians was chosen by Steve. In that reading is encapsulated his belief that Baptism into Christ frees us from the constrictions of the Law and opens us to the Law of Christ, which is love and justice and inclusiveness. *For through faith you are all children of God in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

The Gospel of the Sheep and the Goats: It is the Gospel about the Corporal Works of Mercy and how in serving persons, we serve Christ:

'Come, you who are blessed by my Father.

Inherit the kingdom prepared for you

from the foundation of the world.

For I was hungry and you gave me food,

I was thirsty and you gave me drink,

a stranger and you welcomed me,

naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me,

in prison and you visited me.'

'Amen, I say to you, whatever you did

for one of these least brothers of mine,

you did for me.'

Steve was passionate about making one's love and service concrete and specific as the visible way of serving God and persons. In a myriad of ways, Steve brought his love and service to each community to which he belonged. LOVE OF GOD; LOVE OF OTHERS.

During my years here at St. Mary's, Steve told me that our Parish Pastoral Council needed a Mission Statement. (I don't much like "mission statements." They are often overrated, I think.) I told him that I thought he should lead that discussion. Members of the Council and others met over a period of several months to craft the mission statement. They worked at it until all the members reached a consensus and could sign off on it. It was then presented to the whole Council and adopted. It is a stunning statement and one that we still strive to "enflesh" in this community. This would not have been possible without Steve. Here it is; see if you recognize Steve in it:

St. Mary is a vibrant Catholic community in the Benedictine tradition, baptized into the life of Christ and committed to:

- *Celebrating the Sacraments with dignity, joy and reverence;*
- *Living the Gospel, and serving and welcoming all as we would Christ Himself;*
- *Working for peace, justice, reconciliation and compassion for the poor, the immigrant, youth, the elderly and those without power in our society;*
- *Respecting all life from conception to natural death;*
- *And helping each other to grow in holiness by our lives of humility and compassion.*

We welcome all to St. Mary Church regardless of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, marital status, ability or life situation, and invite all to join us as we work to accomplish our Mission.

We have been blessed in this St. Mary, Mt. Angel community by the presence of Florence and Steve and all they have been and done for us. One of the highest tributes I can make is that Steve lived what he believed, and he witnessed boldly to what he believed and lived it out in his life. For this we will always be grateful. I will close with a quote from Tao Te Ching, which was a favorite of Steve's:

I have just three things to teach:

simplicity, patience, compassion.

These three are your greatest treasures.

Simple in actions and in thoughts,

you return to the source of being.

Patient with both friends and enemies,

you accord with the way things are.

Compassionate toward yourself,

you reconcile all beings in the world.

May the Lord now welcome Steve into his heavenly kingdom. May God show him the special place he has prepared for him and all those who have loved and served Him so well. He has given us an incomparable example to follow.