

A Celebration of the Life of Donald Wilkins
Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
September 6, 2014

Sermon preached by the Rev. Leslie G. Reimer

One thing have I asked of the LORD;
one thing I seek; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life;

To behold the fair beauty of the LORD *
and to seek him in his temple.

Almost exactly twenty years ago, Calvary Church celebrated the fortieth anniversary of Don Wilkins' service as Organist-Choir Director. The Rev. Pam Foster captured the spirit of that occasion: "the celebration of 40 years with Don Wilkins for the people of Calvary Church...40 years in which Don has stood us on our heads with the beauty and quality of his work and the integrity of his being...40 years of his puns, 40 years of his leadership, 40 years of his theology, 40 years of his pastoral care for us."

We gather today to give thanks and celebrate the fullness of his life. We knew him in so many ways – as teacher, colleague, conductor, friend – as a caring brother and uncle, as a husband still completely in love with the woman he met in Paris, as a father quick to speak with pride about the interesting lives of his children, and as a devoted grandfather to Ben, Sam, Max, Nancy, and Renee, whose charm, brightness, and humor are a promise that his spirit will endure to the next generations. We come together in gratitude for the integrity of his being – here in the place where Don Wilkins was profoundly at home.

So many stories about Don begin with "Don brought me" or "Don invited me" - to Calvary Church, to his studio, to skill and competence, to greater insight, to the joy of making music. One person tells it this way: "Don accepted me and after about a year of singing that great sacred music he was presenting and being in that magnificent, holy space, I decided to begin my journey back "home". Life after that is rightly described as a blessed journey and all because Don Wilkins invited me to sing in his choir."

Don chose to be at home – to offer his exceptional talent and skill here, in this community, in this church, in the place where both his musicianship and his faith had

first been formed. Over his entire lifetime, with generosity, kindness, and eagerness to share both the knowledge and the wonder of music, he drew others in. Don drew people in – beyond the superb sound of the music – to the deeper reality it expresses.

In a 1967 interview with Carl Apone, of *The Pittsburgh Press*, in the early days of the Oratorio Society, Don made the case for presenting sacred music in the sacred spaces for which it was composed. The sound is clearer and brighter in a concert hall, he acknowledged. The sound is different when it rolls around and reverberates in the Gothic spaces. Presenting this music in those spaces has an emotional impact. It helps uplift the spirit of the listener. Don proposed that in the beauty and the acoustics of such places, we can learn a different kind of listening.

Don's work allowed us to learn that kind of listening – a listening which engages the soul– a listening for the truth which resonates throughout a holy space filled with sacred sound- a listening for the sacred story and the spiritual meaning within the great choral works. Even the word oratorio has at its root the word for prayer. The Oratorios and Passions so significant to Don open up the central stories of faith and open us to being transformed by them. The Passions, particularly, speak of God's love overcoming evil and death as Jesus goes to the cross on Calvary. It is in this mystery, in this story, that we are drawn in to the power of Christ's resurrection. In listening, we find the courage to confront our grief at the sudden loss of Don Wilkins from our world, and to believe and trust in a meaning and a life beyond what we can see or know.

Don invited us and drew us in - to listen in a different way for these eternal realities. Even now, we can hear all that resonates from his life among us. In the sound of the organ here, shaped by his instinct and wisdom – in the sound of the voices he trained and encouraged – in the music he has left to us – in laughter and in love. These sounds will continue to reverberate for us, just as wondrously as music moves around in a Gothic space, until we are at last, with Don, at home in the presence of God.

With the poet John Donne, let us pray:

Bring us, O Lord God, at our last awakening into the house and gate of heaven, to enter into that gate and dwell in that house, where there shall be no darkness nor dazzling, but one equal light; no noise nor silence, but one equal music; no fears nor hopes, but one equal possession; no ends nor beginnings, but one equal eternity; in the habitations of thy glory and dominion, world without end. Amen.