

The Church of The Good Shepherd (Episcopal)
Rocky Mount, North Carolina
October 21, 2007

The Rev. R. Scott White

Debbie Slone Kornegay

May 29, 1949 — October 18, 2007

“The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness has not overcome it.”

— John 1:5

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*Brightest and best of the sons of the morning,
dawn on our darkness, and lend us thine aid;
star of the east, the horizon adorning,
guide where our infant Redeemer is laid.*

(Hymn 117)

*In the name of the blessed Trinity: Father, Son
and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

From the Gospel of St. John, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” We gather today because of nothing less than a tragedy. “The whole thing is surreal,” we say to each other, and it is. We must say it, things aren't supposed to turn out this way, there is no reason to it, there is no sense to it, there is no justice today, and there will be no justice tomorrow. No legal verdict (though it must be given), no word spoken (though it must be) no song sung (though it is), no tears offered (though they are) will right this wrong for us.

Our beloved Debbie, friend, mother, daughter, sister, sister-in-law, co-worker, aunt, has died—not by the hand of God, but by the hand of another human being. This is truly what St. John of the Cross calls, “The dark night of the soul.”

And so today we turn not to the law for the law cannot save, but rather to the promises of God, who is, the light who shines in the darkness.

In my first year of ministry here at Good Shepherd I had opportunity to bury a number of persons, none of whom I personally knew. But I

knew Debbie Kornegay. We saw each other practically every week as she and Bobby faithfully attended the communion service here each Wednesday morning at 7:30 a.m. Two places in her life were true sanctuaries, safe-havens, Good Shepherd and Ocracoke.

Indeed in the last few days we had been talking as she was going to join the group of lay persons who come here to Good Shepherd each weekday morning to lead Morning Prayer. I'm sure, knowing Debbie, that she wanted to do this not so much for herself but for everybody else, all those who are on our prayer list because of illness, or grief, or some other situation for which they have asked for prayer. “This is important,” she said, “Prayer makes a difference,” she said, “I want to do it.”

“The Light shines in the darkness but the darkness has not overcome it,”

Today of all days let us notice not just the beauty of John's words but also a disturbing truth. Jesus is the light of God who has come into this world, but notice Jesus himself is born into a dark world. Even though his light pierces the darkness it does not dissolve it. Darkness is always present, it is here with us now, though it will never have the power to overcome the light, it exists along side the light and when it stretches its muscles we are hurt.

The ministry of Jesus is to show us that we have been chosen to be the children of the light; that the whole creation waits with eager longing to

see the Sons and Daughters of God be the children of light rather than the children of darkness.

There are some people in this world who instinctively know this. Debbie was one of them. Debbie was true light in the darkness of so many people's lives. She seemed to instinctively understand that she had been called by God, the way each of us have, to be the light of God in what can be a dark and cold world for so many people.

She seemed to have known, in the way so many of us take years to discover, that unless we live our calling as the children of light the darkness will inhabit more space than it deserves.

Debbie generously and lovingly gave of herself without ever seeking recognition and reward. Indeed it seemed to us that she didn't even know that recognition and reward existed. She generously gave of herself because it was her call, because it needed to be done, plain and simple.

And she always gave more than was asked of her.

The irony is that though Debbie led a ministry focused on food, Debbie knew that food alone can never sustain the whole person. People need more. She went out of her way to help clients and others find everything else that they needed, making referrals and getting on the phone herself to find the additional support.

If the clergy folk are truly honest with you they will tell you that they aren't that good. And if the clergy won't be honest than simply go ask the church secretary, that person knows. When people come to the door of the church for assistance the clergy rarely stop what they are doing to help, to give all it takes to that person what they need, "Tell him to make an appointment." "Here's five dollars that's all I've got and I'm on my way to a meeting so I can't do anything else." "I've given out all the money I have for this month."

I can't tell you how many times she called me. And, when I heard her voice on the other end, the call usually went something like this, "Scott, I have a client who needs..." Even this, "Scott, I

have a person standing with me here who needs...what can we do?" And when Debbie called, I stopped what I was doing. Oh how I wish that she had called me the other morning, and that I would have had what he needed—that man standing next to her that she was trying to help.

There will be so many "I wish" moments, there will be so many "if onlys" in the days, months, weeks and years ahead but the truth is that there is nothing anyone could have done. Not me, not Ana, not Bobby, not Bo, not anyone in the church offices. For it is nothing less than a tragedy. Because, though the light shines the darkness, darkness still exists.

Let's not get it wrong though, Debbie was not killed because she was foolish or naïve, or because she was careless or unaware of the realities of life and death and all the risks. She chose to embrace and serve what she knew were the needs of others because they needed her help and she wanted to give it. She did it without judging them, and not allowing herself to be dissuaded by the potential for evil in others.

She understood that her choice carried a liability that she might be exploited or harmed for her work. She accepted that risk and was mindful of it, but not hampered by it.

The cruelty of this tragedy is that Debbie's murderer chose the one person who never would have fought him for what he demanded.

She was trying to help him and probably more than anyone else he had encountered in his quest, even the clergy.

I said earlier that Good Shepherd and Ocracoke were Debbie's safe havens but that's only part of the story for her safest haven was her family.

A beloved wife and companion to Bobby from the very earliest of days, a sweet and loving daughter to Pat and Frank and a proud mother to Bo and Ana. Nobody knows more the power of a parent's ability to be non-judgmental, positive, honest and open than her children.

No one should ever be deprived of a wife's, mother's, daughter's, sister's, or friend's love and companionship because they took the risk, in

love to do the right thing.

But that is what has happened.

Debbie's self sacrifice leaves the rest of us needing to learn from her example how we are going to accept her death, deal with our grief, and live our own lives as she would expect us to.

And it is in the shadow of her example that we will all observe or participate in how the legal system ultimately will deal with the perpetrator of the unspeakable crime.

But Debbie's life shows us how we can do the hard things we now have to do, and nothing would be acceptable to her except that we do it.

Our city is in desperate need of a positive example of one who sought not to divide but to unite, one who sought to love rather than hate, one who sought to reject violence for the way of love.

Let Debbie be our example.

Debbie's light seems to have been extinguished but it has not. Ask all the people who will continue to have hot warm meals, because we will not let this ministry end. Ask all the other people whom she anonymously met on the road and stopped and helped.

It seems to us that Debbie's light has been extinguished, but with God things aren't always what they seem, are they?

Well we all know someone else who was a good person, who did the right thing, who challenged everyone to their better selves, who called each person out of their shells, who asked even us to be the children of light. And when the darkness of this world nailed him to a tree, God raised him up.

And because God raised Jesus from the dead, his light shines as the brightest and best of all the stars of the morning. And because Jesus' light shines we know that Debbie's light continues to shine.

For what the darkness hasn't yet figured out is that every time it seeks to destroy the children of light, God's children only rise up to shine brighter than they ever did before.

The Light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not over come it.

Amen.