**A Good Word for Martha Wood
March 9, 2012**

 I think it was the first sentence out of Cynthia’s mouth in our memorial service planning after I said, “Tell me about your mother.” Cynthia said, “She always bloomed where she was planted.” A fitting statement for a gardener of Martha’s caliber. And I can think of no better compliment for how to live this one life we’ve been given – to bloom where we are planted. That is not to say that Martha was all together thrilled about moving out of her house of 40+ years into a condo and then another move into an assisted living facility, but in every move Martha made friends and planted a garden. I think I want to be like that when I grow up. Making the most of bad health, making the most of being displaced, making the most of living apart from her husband, making the most of needing oxygen by tank and not just the air, making the most of grief, making the most of each part of her life, Martha always invested in people and invested in the soil, and in so doing she nurtured relationships of the human kind and of the blossom and vegetable producing earth.

 Being a mother and grandmother was her life’s work. She was a homemaker in the true sense of that word in that her vocation was making a home for her family. While AB travelled during the week on business, Martha kept the home running smoothly. She was busy with 4 children and getting them all involved in church. They bought a little unfinished cabin on Lake Norman and while AB finished house, Martha got another yard to tend. Nothing could make her happier. That was their weekend fun – fixing up the place inside and out. Last August, Martha and AB celebrated 63 years of building a life and a family together. They each had their own way of doing that, but together, that’s exactly what they did. She learned and honed her homemaking skills early in life in taking on some of the mothering of a younger sister. She liked to claim that she practically raised Pat herself. Quite a task to be a child herself, but she was a tender, no doubt.

 Martha’s way was to be “a survivor and a thriver,” as Cynthia put it. She was able to make her way out of no way with her tenacious spirit. And let’s be honest, she had a way of getting her way. She made things happen. She was the kind of person that was behind the scenes running the joint. I think that was her way at home and at Brighton Gardens. In her own way, she took over in the best sense of that word. For example, after settling in at Brighton Gardens, she took over the garden area and had a sidewalk poured so that folks in wheelchairs could enjoy what she had planted. She had the folks in Memory Care plant flowers that could then be placed in the garden area for all to enjoy. Just last Friday, right before she was discharged from the hospital, she told me she had to get back to Brighton because there was garden work that needed her tending. On my way to church this morning I couldn’t help but notice the flowers that are bursting out all over. One particular yard had the most beautiful red tulips - probably 50 of them, perfectly straight and tall and just getting ready to really show off all their beauty. And I thought about Martha. It’s as if this season’s flowers are coming alive in celebration of all that she has given in beauty to this earth.

 But here is the best thing about what gardening did for Martha. She has told me several times that all of her gardening wasn’t just for others. It was her therapy. As Cynthia put it, “She dug those holes and buried her sorrows and something beautiful bloomed and she shared that with others.” All of that time with dirt under her fingernails was her grief work. And it was the same with all of her craftiness. She and Elmore Liverman set up shop at Martha’s house where they painted ceramic Santas. And with their creative energy they shared many laughs and many cries as they brought color to the image of one who is known to bring joy to children of all ages.

 Martha was the crafty kind, always able to take something ordinary and bring out the beauty in it. Cynthia gave me a quote that describes this best: “We are born into this world like a blank canvas, and each person that crosses our path takes up the brush and makes his mark upon our surface. So it is that we develop. But we must realize there comes a day that we must take up the brush and finish the work; for only we can determine if we are to be just another painting or a masterpiece. It is, then, for us to look about us at the people we love and respect, to touch them and value them and to take those good things we admire about them into our own hearts. A day may come when the memory of those things is all we have.” (from an editorial in the Charlotte Observer by Bob Inman) Today, it will be in those memories of flowers and vegetables and painted Santas that we will remember Martha’s touch on this world. She brought color and life and beauty. And that is a gift.

 In addition to her family, Martha’s support system was her Sunday School class. The Dorcas class, or as Martha called them, “the girls,” (I love that!) – that group of women have been together a long, long time. Martha was raised in a Christian home and a Baptist Church and she has found her strength and support in large measure in the church. Though in more recent years, she has not been able to be actively involved, she has kept in touch with “the girls” and they have been a real strength for her.

 When I asked Martha’s family to give me one word to describe her, I found them using the same words that I would have used: vivacious and spunky, feisty and tenacious, and most of all, full of life. And she had a way of making me laugh. I often say of grief that the way one gets through it is by laughing and crying and laughing and crying and then laughing and crying some more. And Martha was good at both of those. She would laugh until she cried and sometimes cried until she laughed. It seems to me to be an authentic and holy way to live – recognizing the goodness in the midst of pain and joy in the midst of sorrow, Martha had a way of living life to the fullest even when she was knocked down by the hard blows of life.

 I loved hearing some of Martha’s family reminisce about her - like how she had a story for anything and how she never let the truth get in the way of a good story; and the way she chased rabbits could make a story even more wonderful and colorful even if the truth got stretched just a little in the process. She was a spoiler of grandchildren with a candy jar and cookies and lots of cooking once they arrived at her house. And she was also known to put them to work in her gardening. And she was a card sender. But not just any card sender. She was the kind that actually took the time to read the inside part to make sure it contained the right words for the right occasion for the right person. And giving over 1000 hours of service in volunteering in the hospital, she brought joy and warmth to many patients and families along the way.

 Yes, indeed, she did bloom where she was planted. And nothing takes the place of that kind of beauty. Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it this way, ““Nothing can make up for the absence of someone whom we love, and it would be wrong to try to find a substitute; we must simply hold out and see it through. That sounds very hard at first, but at the same time it is a great consolation, for the gap, as long as it remains unfilled, preserves the bond between us. It is nonsense to say God fills the gap; he does not fill it, but on the contrary, He keeps it empty and so helps us to keep alive our former communion with each other, even at the cost of pain.”

 Today, we can only try and imagine the garden that has begun in Heaven’s courtyard. I can see the red tulips now, just ready to burst open and the tomatoes, though out of season here, are probably ripe for the picking there. And I believe with all my being that today, Martha Wood is firmly planted in God’s garden and that surely Martha is tending it well. I would even say that she is in full bloom there. Thanks be to God.