

**A Good Word
for Betty Mahaffey
July 1, 2008**

I did not know Betty Mahaffey. Oh, I had met her once or twice, but that's not the same thing as knowing her. But I don't have to have known her to know who she was. Betty Mahaffey was a Beloved Child of God. When it comes right down to it – what more is there to know? I've gotten a little of her story from Nancy: a stay-at-home mom who was always helping everybody. She was the neighborhood watch program and the family/community caregiver. She was a great cook in her day, and Nancy even shared good memories of family camping trips. But Betty's life was marked by loss. She outlived all of her siblings, her husband died at a young age, and perhaps the worst loss of all – to outlive your children and she outlived two of hers. That is not the right order of life and those losses surely must have taken their toll on her spirit. Life is never promised to be easy – and I don't think it was an easy life for Betty. But though life is never a promise of easy living – there is the promise of the presence of God with us, around us, beside us, within us that sees us through all the days of our lives and even into forever.

Nancy, as you shared bits of your story and Betty's story with me, I found myself giving thanks that you had these last few years with your mother. Years for healing and years for relationship. Years for caring and caregiving. Years for saying and hearing those words that everyone needs: I love you. I pray that by giving these years of dedicating your life to your mother's care you will be able to hear and receive these words that we all long to hear: *Well done, good and faithful servant.*

But it's the birds that I want to talk about. When I asked Nancy to tell me about her mother, her first words were – she loved birds – she kept binoculars close by to watch them. That's why I chose the passage from Matthew's telling of the Sermon on the Mount. When Jesus

is talking to us about worry/anxiety/fear, he speaks of the *birds of the air – they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns and yet God feeds them*. Betty Mahaffey knew her share of worry and anxiety and fear, I believe, and yet she knew how to watch the birds. Surely their chirping was like the calming voice of God to her. Surely their beauty was a reminder of the God who creates and turns chaos into order. Surely the way the birds would fly was a sign of the freedom of our lives – given to us by God. And a sign of the freedom of God’s goodness and grace and forgiveness. And a sign of the free and unconditional love of God that is always our best hope.

In a book about grief entitled *A Bird Sings*, Jane Golden tells about the death of her husband and how a bird played into her healing process. “You know I heard that bird not too long ago . . . The family, sad-eyed, sitting by the casket of the loved one as it rested on its supports over that gaping hole in the ground . . . ‘Let not your heart be troubled,’ the preacher quoted Jesus. ‘Because I live, you shall live too . . . God loves you . . . Yes, you . . . Don’t be afraid!’ And this bird starts singing! It really does. Other people heard it! I hear that bird a lot . . . ‘bout every time I feel like crying, I hear that bird. The cynics among you will say, ‘Well, the whole business is ‘for the birds’!’ If you want to know the truth, I’m for that bird!”

So for those who knew her best and loved her most, I pray that birds will sing a new song for you – the song of God which is always the song of hope. It is always the song of forgiveness. It is always the song of love. And it is always the song of peace. Forever and ever. May it be so.