

Sermon August 30, 2009

St. John's Episcopal Church

Anne Mansfield Minton

Last Monday and Tuesday I was working hard on the sermon for today. I even have a copy to show you! But then, Senator Kennedy died. And, like me, you have probably been following the coverage of his death on television and have listened to all the tributes pouring in from around the world about his life and his work. I remember when each of my parents died. And, at the wake people I knew and people I didn't know came up to me to tell me stories about what my parents had done for them. Things I never knew. My father would give legal advice and be paid in strawberry jam. My mother would leave food baskets on people's doorsteps for special events and holidays. We lived in the inner city and no one around us, including us, had much money. But, caring for others and thinking of their needs does not require a lot of money. And, luckily my whole family liked strawberry jam, so it worked out well!

That is what I have been thinking about these days as stories emerge about Senator Kennedy. His family must be so comforted by hearing this seemingly endless stream of remembrances about things they probably never even knew he did. Every Wednesday he went to a school in the

District of Columbia to read to the children. A man with his schedule found time every Wednesday for them. Person after person spoke about his calling them, sending them notes, showing up. Calling those who lost family members on 9/11 and then remembering them each year on the anniversary. Personal notes abound. One woman whose husband died on 9/11 had sent him a thank you note for all he had done for them. Then he sent her a note to thank her for thanking him. And so it goes on!

He showed up at wakes and funerals for many Massachusetts service people who died in Iraq and Afghanistan. He was present to the people whom he served for 47 years in the Senate. But, it was more than notes and calls and visits, although they are powerful in themselves. It was also, as Vice President Biden remarked, that when you were with him it was never about HIM, it was always about you. All of us know the difference. We know when someone is speaking to us but they would really prefer speaking to someone more interesting, intelligent or powerful! All of us know when someone is speaking to us but the whole conversation actually revolves around them. We are there more as a foil for them. But that was not Senator Kennedy. That was not how he was.

I was reminded of a friend of mine who worked in a Catholic school. One day an older priest, very learned and holy, came to her office. She had

never seen him before. My friend was going through a very difficult time and was in need of some comfort. But, the stranger didn't know that. What he said to her, completely taking her aback, was "You are very close to God. I have seen how you treat people." And then he left and she never saw him again. When Vice-President Biden spoke about Senator Kennedy I was reminded of that priest and what he said about how we treat people. Because, as Christians we are told to treat everyone as we would treat Christ. Because in fact, it is Christ whom we encounter in everyone else. Kennedy chose Matthew chapter 25 for his funeral Mass. "Whatever you did to the least of my brothers and sisters, you did to me."

The priest who gave Senator Kennedy the last rites of the church spoke about his family gathered around him praying, keeping vigil and supporting him with prayer as he took his last journey home to God. And the priest commented that this was a side of Kennedy that many people did not know. His Christian life, his faith, sustained him and impelled him in his life's work. What he did was shaped by his faith. Care for the weak, the vulnerable, the poor, the voiceless. Minimum wage legislation, civil rights legislation, Title IX legislation, education legislation, immigration legislation, and what he described as the great cause of his life, universal

health care. He said that health care for every American was a right not a privilege and to this cause he devoted most of his working life.

But, we all know that Senator Kennedy, by his own admission, was a flawed person who had failed at various times in his personal life. We all have lapses and mistakes and sins in our lives but most of us don't see them on the front page of the New York Times and as the lead story on CNN. Kennedy did. And, for me that is as much the story of his faith as is the story of his advocacy for justice. Christianity is a religion for sinners. Luckily, I'd say! This is something that the Pharisees of today's gospel never understood. For them the good news was bad news. They did not want God to forgive sinners and show mercy to the undeserving. I, on the other hand, am very comforted by that. And, comforted that we don't get what we deserve. God is always there eager to draw us back into the circle of grace, eager to embrace us and welcome us into the community of the redeemed and forgiven.

Senator Kennedy had an opportunity to turn, with God's grace, from the sins and mistakes of his life and to redirect his energies and his work and his whole life to God's dream for him and for the world. God wanted him whole and graced and filled with compassion. And God wanted him an advocate for justice and a voice for the poor. And before our very eyes- on

the front pages of the New York Times and on CNN -we saw him turn around, which is the actual meaning of conversion. To turn around. Christianity is a second chance religion! I tell people I'm in the second chance business! And Senator Kennedy took advantage of that and grabbed hold of his second chance.

His life offers us an inspiration for a life committed to making God's dream for us and for the world enfleshed. It offers us an inspiration for a cherishing of others and a profound respect for all people. It offers us a powerful example of repenting and returning to the Lord, as our baptismal covenant says. As we commit our brother to the arms of God and his body to the earth, let us commit ourselves to live our Christian life as fully as God will give us grace- with compassion, justice and repentance full measure pressed down and following over.. For as long as God shall give us breath.

May Senator Kennedy's soul and the souls of all the faithful departed through the mercy of God rest in peace. Amen.