

PENTECOST XV

GOD helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. It is GOD who helps me; who will declare me guilty? Isaiah 50:7-9

Three great men died this summer. Well, four if you count Michael Jackson, but I can't fit him in to my theme today.

First, Dr. George Tiller. . Dr Tiller was a physician from Wichita, Kansas and the medical director of a clinic in Wichita, Women's Health Care Services, one of only three nationwide which self-identified as providing abortions after the 21st week of pregnancy.

Operation Rescue, the anti-choice vigilantes, kept a daily vigil outside Tiller's clinic for many years: first the national group, then later a branch that moved from California to Kansas specifically to focus on Tiller. In 1993, outside of the Wichita clinic, Dr.Tiller was shot in both arms by Shelley Shannon, who received an 11-year prison sentence for the crime.

On May 31, 2009, Dr. Tiller was shot and killed, allegedly by anti-abortion activist Scott Roeder, *as he served as an usher during the Sunday morning service* at his church in Wichita.[]

I didn't know Dr. Tiller. But I knew his reputation. He was dedicated, he was courageous, he believed fervently in his mission of delivering reproductive health care to women who needed it most, in the face of constant harassment, threat, and danger. The women who found their way to Dr. Tiller's clinic in Kansas were women who faced the most difficult and painful choices possible: between their own lives and those of their potential children, for example. Or between a late abortion and bearing a grotesquely deformed child. Or between a late abortion and a stillbirth or the birth of a baby who whose quick death was assured.

And Dr. Tiller, by all accounts, was a saint. He was kind, he was concerned, he was compassionate. And most of all, he was faithful to his mission, to provide desperately needed care to women from all over the country. One couple I counseled, when they returned from his clinic, told me, “We were so well cared for; we feel so lucky!” Imagine!

As I said, I didn’t know Dr. Tiller, although he may have been sitting in a roomful of abortion care providers from all over the country in 1985 when I spoke on a clergy panel entitled “Abortion as a Moral Choice.” The room was filled with folks on the front lines, those staffing clinics across the country, who, in addition to enduring daily harassment and physical danger, were constantly told that they were doing the devil’s work. They were all so grateful to hear from clergy who assured them that, on the contrary, they were doing God’s work. I ‘d been a prochoice activist for years, but that day made me a pro-choice activist with a clerical collar.

I believe that George Tiller was, indeed, doing God’s work, and that he is a martyr to the cause of reproductive justice for women.

Next, Ted Kennedy. I didn’t know Senator Kennedy either, though in a sense I think we all knew him. We all felt, we all believed, that we had a little piece of him, as our almost-eternal senior senator from Massachusetts. And that was his genius, or part of it, that despite his legacy of wealth and fame, he was a man of the people and we loved him for his grand, expansive, generous heart. And his flaws. We loved him, I think, because unlike so many politicians he was not a hypocrite. He did not pretend to be flawless or *holier than thou*. At the same time, he practiced a deep, lifelong, discipline of faith as a Roman Catholic.

I read in one of the tributes to Senator Kennedy that he understood governance, but not politics. I think that was wrong. He may not have understood meta-politics in the way that his brothers did; he stumbled in his one presidential campaign. But he was a master of retail politics. He truly cared about people, he truly listened, he truly reached out, and between his common touch and his wizardry in the Senate, he made a huge mark on American society.

Here’s what Nicholas Lemann of the New Yorker had to say about Kennedy’s commitment to universal health care, perhaps his most critical and longest struggle in a lifetime of struggle.

Kennedy, who entered the Senate in 1963, didn't come to support universal health care until he was in his second term, when the country had become more liberal. Even Richard Nixon endorsed a form of universal health care. Then history moved again: by 1980, Kennedy was too liberal to get the nomination of his own party and Ronald Reagan was no longer too conservative to be elected President. But Kennedy's relentless support for universal health care kept it in a kind of incubated state, ready to reëmerge whenever the political climate shifted again. ...

The passage of a substantive health-care bill would be immensely to Obama's credit, but he would not be its only begetter. What he said in Reno (during the presidential campaign) was exactly right: if he winds up being able to shift the trajectory of American politics, it will be because the country was ready. Ted Kennedy spent a career making sure that it would be.

The public discourse over health care reform – I would say *debate* but perhaps *hysteria* would be more accurate– has not approached the violent craziness of the abortion wars. Not quite. I'm very sorry that Senator Kennedy has died, but I'm not sorry he's not here to witness the depths to which the opponents of his dream have sunk..

I pray that Senator Kennedy's efforts will not be in vain, and that his faithfulness to his dream of fundamental justice will be rewarded. I have no doubt that he rests peacefully in the arms of God, in whom the love of justice originates and resides.

Third, Bishop John Coburn. I *did* know Bishop Coburn; he was the bishop who shepherded me through the ordination process and ordained me a deacon in 1985. But that was not his principle claim to glory.

The Episcopal Times said,

He is remembered as a consummate church politician who brought a deep prayer life to bear on deliberations over contentious issues of the day. An early advocate and behind-the-scenes agent for women's ordination, he was seen by many opponents on the issue as a steady and fair arbiter in the church's highest councils. While representing the establishment during a period of popular distrust of historic institutions, he preached a social Gospel and had a heart for the urban poor. Intellectual and well read, he was also plainspoken in prayer and eloquently matter-of-fact in his teaching, writing and oratory.

And here's something Bishop Coburn wrote,

“God is not especially or even primarily, interested in our “religious” activities; God is concerned with all our activities.” John wrote, “We show our response to God by our actions throughout the week as well as on Sundays; in our hours of employment and leisure as well as in our hours of worship; in the way we treat the members of our family as well as the way we usher in church. God is as concerned with how much money we spend on luxuries as with the amount we give to the church; with our sex life as with our prayer life; with the control of our temper and talents as with our piety and devotions. There is no area of life that is not subject to the Lord of all life.”

I will always hear in my ears the sound of Bishop Coburn’s voice on the phone, after I’d had a long day of interviews with the Commission on Ministry to determine whether I would be admitted to the ordination process. “Anne,” he said, “I think we have to go ahead with this.” That was by no means the end of my trial, only the beginning of a new chapter. But Bishop Coburn stood by me, stood with me, through it all, as an advocate and a wise counselor.

For many years, until he died this summer. Bishop Coburn attended St Anne’s in the Fields in Lincoln, and I would see him sometimes in his wheelchair when I went to worship there, where my friend Cathy George was rector. I would greet him and he would smile and ask what I was doing. “Still at St. John’s,” I would tell him. “I’m there for the duration!” We had that exchange for the last time a bit more than a year ago. “Well then, “ he said, “How about a kiss?” I’m glad those were his last words to me.

But they were not his most important words. Those were words he said to me the first time I met him, at the beginning of that long day of interviews. He came up to me in the diocesan offices and said, “I’m glad to meet you. I want to thank you for two things. First, you have been an enormous personal help to Dick Martin and his wife.” (Dick was my sponsoring rector in Belmont, and dear friend.) “And second,” said Bishop Coburn, “You went to All Saints’ Church in Belmont and they weren’t your kind of people. But you stayed. You stayed. And that, “ he said, “*that* is the Church.”

Here’s what Bishop Shaw said about his predecessor and friend Bishop Coburn.

“He made lasting contributions to the wider church through his writings

and his preaching, but particularly through his unparalleled and precedent-setting leadership as the president of the church's General Convention House of Deputies during years when controversial issues of prayerbook revision and women's ordination were being decided. He would say of ministry, 'You are never done. Christ's ministry is never over.' John's was a ministry of grace, and he has done it."

Above all, Bishop Coburn was faithful. Faithfulness is what he commended me for, and what he commended me to, and I have tried to honor his faith and trust in me.

George Tiller. Edward Kennedy. John Coburn. Three bold, visionary, committed, faithful men. May they rest in peace. And may the words of the prophet Isaiah bless them,

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Alleluia! Amen