**“Faith, Hope, Love…and Music!”**

A Sermon

 by The Rev. Christopher S. Wendell

In Celebration of the life of Joan Kay Reddy

Given at a Memorial Eucharist on Monday, June 9, 2014

At St Paul’s Episcopal Church in Bedford, Massachusetts

*“You are the light of the world….Let your light shine before others,*

*so they may see your good works and give glory to your father in Heaven.”*

I still remember the name of the woman who taught me to sing. Her name was Mrs. Ballard, Edith Ballard. I was five years old and she was older than God. Two years later she left my school to move to Virginia. And I remember being so very sad – sad enough at least that I wrote her a card, and she wrote me one back from Virginia. I’m not quite sure why I was so sad. I only saw her twice a week for 30 minutes, and our encounters were always very formal. But, looking back on it now, I think perhaps it was because she was the first person who really taught me how to sing. And even then, at that age, I think I knew that I was losing something special at having to say goodbye to the person who first introduced me to the gift of music.

St. Paul says, in that famous passage from first Corinthians, that the most important gifts in life are faith, hope and love. But in the immediate tier beneath those, I would add music. Because music is a gateway into faith and hope and love, for many, many people. Music invites us into the mysteries of faith, into the joys of love, and into the possibilities of hope. Music helps us feel emotions we can’t express. It helps us comprehend things we can’t articulate. It helps us dream of a transformed reality beyond the present. Music unlocks the gift of these blessings, opens our hearts and souls to them in a way that no text or lesson or sermon every could. And it was Joan who unlocked the music in the lives of so many people.

After she moved to Carleton Willard, Joan began to give more and more of her private piano lessons to young people here at the church in the library. I’m not usually around the church much in the late afternoons, but I happened to pop back in one day after a particularly tough pastoral visit. I came into the Narthex and heard the sounds of a beginning piano lesson coming from the library. As I listened from the hall way, I heard the familiar pattern of a lesson: the student’s tentative notes, the teacher’s directive voice, a question, an answer, the silence, the breath of pause, the beginning again. And then again. And then again.

I’ve never known a bubbly and effusive piano teacher of children. And I knew Joan. But that moment that afternoon, I could see beneath the ritual of formal piano instruction the care and warmth…even love…that Joan had for this young person. Because Joan knew that what the structures and the exercises and the drilling were giving was the gift of music, and that that gift would unlock the most important blessings in that young student’s life for years and decades to come.

In John’s Gospel, Jesus says to his disciples, “I am the light of the World.” But in the passage I selected for Joan’s service today, he says instead, “You are the light of the World.” I selected this passage not just because I feel that Joan herself was the light of the world, or at least reflected that light to others (though, of course, she certainly did). Rather, I selected it because in my experience, Joan treated others as if they were the light of the world – or at least, as if they had the light of the world within them to share as a gift. A lot of times, church people, particularly those of us who work for churches, go around thinking that we are the light of the world, with so much to teach others. Joan was never confused in that way. Joan believed that other people had something to show her, to teach her, even as she spent most of her life quietly and diligently teaching others. Whether they were seven or seventy, Joan treated others with respect for their dignity, their worth, and most important their voice. Even when she disagreed with them.

Which brings me to a story about when Joan and I met. I came to this church three years ago. My first Sunday was the Sunday of Joan’s 10th anniversary of beginning her ministry here. Those first few August weeks, I think neither of us was too certain how this was going to go. Here was a seventy eight year old church woman, a former moderator of her long time Congregational Parish in Cambridge. She’d worked here a decade already, and during that time, built up a music program based entirely upon on volunteer voices, the love of music, and respect for worship. And here was I. A twenty-nine year old first time Rector…with lots of ideas.

I didn’t change much about worship that first year. But there was one thing I was determined to change after just one Sunday. The offertory hymn. For various reasons, I really didn’t like inserting a hymn between the choir’s anthem and the doxology. So I decided we would try moving it to communion time instead. Joan hated this idea the moment I brought it up, and she hated it for the “trial month” I convinced her to give it, and she hated it for the two and half years we kept doing it after the trial received significantly positive feedback.

But what I loved the most about working with Joan was that even though she didn’t like this decision, even though she shared her opinion about it with me several times over three years, she respected me and my opinions about how I though the flow of the worship would work best. She said to me, I don’t agree with this, but I agree that this decision is part of your ministry, and I’ll do what I can to make it work.

There were times later on in our shared ministry here where the shoe was on the other foot, and out of respect for her ministry, I let her make choices I didn’t particularly like. And as we lived those choices together, we realized that our experience of worship was richer for it. We were able to learn things from the other person that we wouldn’t otherwise have known. I was able to come to see the light of Christ in Joan, because she made it so clear that she was willing to see it in me.

The last week has been quite a hard one for me, as I am sure it has been for many of you. I’ve been sad at the prospect of not sharing any more staff meetings with Joan, waiting to see what “additional items” she had to bring up as she did each week. I’m going to especially miss the way she cared pastorally for everyone in this parish who made music – especially the choir. She never lost sight of the pastoral dimensions of her ministry here – never forgot that though she was a musician by profession, among us she was a minister of music. But most of all, I’ll miss her excellent judgment about all things church. I always trusted Joan’s thoughtful council and disinterested advice when something came up around the parish. She was so good at putting the needs of the community before her own needs, in both word and deed. What more faithful kind of discipleship to our Lord could there be?

I take comfort in knowing that Joan’s body is no longer suffering, and that her spirit is now living within the heart of the Divine. Joan’s faithfulness to God was real. Her belief that God’s love was at the center of the universe, radiating compassion through all creation, was strong. She believed God loved her, and us, and the whole world – and wanted us to love each other. And her desire to praise God in worship and to serve God’s people was so strong that it compelled her to work well into her 81st year of life.

I have a hard time thinking of Joan entering into “eternal rest”. I don’t think Joan believed much in any kind of rest…eternal or otherwise. So I’ll be thinking of Joan as continuing the ministry of music she loved so well. As someone put it this week – she’s got a much larger venue now. Knowing Joan, she’s already recruited St. Peter into the choir….and she’s requested that St. Cecelia come in for some private coaching twice a week. The heavenly chorus is in for a tune up!

May Joan’s soul, and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercies of God, rest in peace. Amen.