

Remembrance and Reflection on Elizabeth Alling Sewall

Remarks by the Reverend Samuel S. Rodman

I want to begin this afternoon with the last part of the quotation from Cardinal Newman which Elizabeth chose for this service “they came to my great joy, they went to my great grief.” Each and every moment spent with Elizabeth was full of joy, and without her our hearts are heavy with grief ... great grief. Not that this is where Elizabeth would want us to focus. She was very clear about the tone and the message of today’s service, full of hope, full of light, full of great gratitude for the gift and blessing of life, each moment, every breath. But she was also ever gracious, fully aware and completely connected to the deep sense of loss that we now feel. I can hear her voice saying, “I know people are going to be sad and they need to be allowed to feel that, but we also need to lead them through the sadness ... to something more.

Elizabeth knew that there was something beyond the sadness because she found herself in that place. If you had the opportunity to spend time with Elizabeth in more recent months, you know what I am talking about. She was at peace. She was full of love and light. Each moment was a blessing and every exchange was touched by grace. Elizabeth found her strength in living well, to the very end. She met her illness full on and made choices at every step that allowed her to squeeze every drop of life from each day, each encounter. She was fearless and unblinking. She took her characteristic drive and redirected it. And in doing so, brought us all to a new and deeper place.

None of this should have been a surprise. Whatever Elizabeth set her mind to, she accomplished. Whether she was strategizing for a successful capital campaign, guiding Duncan through a difficult problem with his math homework, or settling a score on the tennis court, Elizabeth carried it off, and made it look effortless.

I loved running into Elizabeth around town or at the fruit center. She was often multitasking, doing about six things at once, but she made it

appear that she was completely immersed in the particular task at hand. Eventually I came to the conclusion that Elizabeth actually just had this supernatural ability to fully immerse herself in six things simultaneously, without ever even breaking a sweat.

She would deny the superwoman analogy, but we know better. And even Elizabeth would probably have to admit to being a super-mom. And by that I mean that she struck the perfect balance: attentive, present, engaged, deeply loving and even, occasionally, fiercely loyal, but never overly protective or interfering.

Scott and Duncan, there is no way of replacing the love your mother had for each of you. The truth is, we don't have to, because your mother's love has left a lasting mark on you that not even death can take away. To quote no less an authority than Dumbledore speaking to Harry Potter, at the end of the first book: "If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love. A love as powerful as your mother's love for you leaves its own mark. Not a scar, no visible sign ... to have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved you is gone, will give you some protection forever. It is in your very skin." Your mother's love is always as close as your own skin, as near to you as your next breath. Trust it, count on it.

And Elizabeth's deep love for Gordon was the constant and still center-point around which your lives turned. I am sure you had your moments, as all couples do. But to most of us, looking in from the outside, yours was the kind of marriage we all dream about, and aspire to. The affection was always genuine, natural and spontaneous. And not many couples can work in the same field and travel in the same circles and carry it off. But this was one of the hallmarks of your partnership.

And friendship for Elizabeth was at the heart of life, and the source of one of life's greatest joys. That is why the other reading she chose for this service, from the Confessions of St. Augustine, is so powerful. "All kinds of things rejoiced my soul in their company to talk and laugh and do each other kindnesses; read pleasant books together, pass from lightest

jest to deepest things, and back again ...teach each other or learn from each other ... these and such like things ... kindled a flame which fused our very souls and of many made us one.”

It is that oneness, that sense of connection that helps us through the loneliness, the emptiness of our grief.

Elizabeth had a gift for friendship, the kind of friendship that fills you up to overflowing. Like the image in the 23rd Psalm of the cup that runneth over. About 10 days ago, Gordon and I were talking on the phone and I was asking him how he was doing. And he said, “You know, it’s a lot, and there are plenty of ups and downs, but I have these moments when I just feel Elizabeth, her fullness ... I don’t know how else to describe it.”

Elizabeth knew that fullness was one of life’s greatest gifts. It is what the Bible sometime calls abundant life, and what the Buddhist’s sometimes call mindfulness. It is at the heart of what Jesus promises when he speaks of resurrection. It is that feeling each of has from time to time when we are just so deeply, deeply grateful. As Bill Coffin, Chaplain at Yale before Elizabeth’s time there, put it so eloquently ... “Thanks and thanks, ... ever, ever thanks.”

The other image central to Elizabeth’s faith was light. God, for Elizabeth, was light. In fact she felt this so strongly that when we were planning her service, as much as she loved St. Michael’s we talked about possibly holding the service at the First Parish because the windows are clear and let in lots of light. In the end for a variety of reasons, we ended up here because this is the church community Elizabeth felt closest to and we agreed that there would be lots of references to light, especially in the prayers and hymns to try and convey the sense that Elizabeth had of being surrounded and filled with light, in the source of life, and healing and hope.

Last Wednesday, I was here for a planning meeting for the service (did you think Elizabeth would let us put together a service for her, without lots of advance planning preparation and organization?) As I made my way through the front courtyard and down the path, I looked off to my

left and noticed a large dumpster in the rectory driveway, where they are completing renovations. I started to continue down the path and suddenly almost without my permission my legs had turned me around and I was headed back into the office and I found myself in front of Vicki's Rugo's desk, saying, "Is there anything we can do about that dumpster in the driveway?" Vicki gave me this curious look, because in the roughly 15 or so years we worked together I was notorious for NOT ever noticing obvious things that should be straightened up, cleaned up, picked up or simply removed. She did a bit of a double take and I said, "I know ... this is completely out of character ... I must be channeling Elizabeth." It reminded me of Gordon's words to me shortly after Elizabeth had died, He said, "She is one day into reorganizing heaven, we should see the results shortly."

When I walked back out of the office, I had a flashback. It was April, the week after Easter. I was walking up the sidewalk in front of the church and there was Elizabeth, with a friend, walking back toward Milton Academy. She waved and called to me from across the street and I crossed over to greet her. She had recently finished her work at Fessenden. She was smiling brightly, full of light and full of life. We hadn't seen each other for months, but it was as if no time had passed. We picked up right where we had left off, our friendship rekindled ... "proceeding from our hearts as we gave affection..." It was a reunion of sorts, but it was also a foreshadow of a greater reunion. The one that is promised by Jesus. The one that is anticipated in these words from an 19th century English clergyman, but could have been spoken by Elizabeth herself:

"Life means all that it ever meant. It is the same as it ever was:
There is absolute unbroken continuity

Why should I be out of your mind, because I am out of your sight
I am waiting for you for an interval, somewhere very near, just around the
corner,
All is well."

Elizabeth we love you. We give thanks to God for every moment of every day with you. We give thanks for your love for us. We give thanks that the things that you valued the most, are the things that last, the things that are forever: the love of family, the gift of friendship, the light of faith, and the promise, that nothing will be able to separate us from those we love, and from the God who made us, the One who makes us one.

AMEN.