

*In Celebration of the Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ and in Thanksgiving
for the Life of Kathy Arnold Taft*

March 13, 2010

HOMILY

Let us pray: Take, O God, receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, my entire will. You have given all to me, now I return it. All I have is yours. Dispose of it, wholly according to your will. Give me only your love and your grace, with these I am rich enough. I desire no more. Amen. (Prayer of St. Ignatius of Loyola)

“The Spirit we have, not the work we do, is what makes us important to the people around us.” This quote from Sister Joan Chittister, who is one of my favorite spiritual authors, describes for me the unique and special relationships Kathy Arnold Taft had with such a wide array of people in so many diverse settings, both within our local community and throughout the state. She loved Greenville and eastern Carolina and gave of her life in generous service to others. Her appointment by Governor Jim Hunt to the North Carolina Board of Education in 1995, following five years of service on the Pitt County school board, opened the door for her to make a significant impact on improving public schools throughout all of North Carolina. Along the way, she volunteered her time and services to countless organizations, especially those committed to being a voice for the vulnerable in our society. On my way to the hospital in Raleigh on Tuesday morning, I stopped briefly at my office to bring something I wanted to take with me in meeting with Kathy’s family to her bedside – and couldn’t help but be distracted by the piece of mail on the top of on my desk. It was an invitation from The Communities in Schools of Pitt County, an organization Kathy helped to found many years ago. I opened the envelope and thought of Kathy as I read the theme for this year’s fundraiser, “The Art of Giving.” If anyone can speak about this without needing to use words, it certainly was Kathy!

“The Spirit we have, not the work we do, is what makes us important to the people around us.” And for Kathy, this was most evident in the midst of her family, her children and being with her beautiful grandchildren. It’s why I chose the text from the Gospel of Mark for this celebration of thanksgiving for Kathy’s life, because it’s about children and how much they teach us about what’s really important in life. For as passionate and committed Kathy was as a public servant, her passion and commitment to her kids and grandkids was even more impressive and admirable.

Can you imagine the surprise and maybe even the embarrassment of the disciples of Jesus, who, after arguing among themselves about who was the most important, see Jesus take a child, like one of Kathy’s youngest grandchildren, and place him before them. “You want to be important,” Jesus asks them, “This is what you need to do. Pay attention to the needs of a child, a little one who can’t give you anything of material value.” Children can’t advance our careers. Children can’t enhance our prestige. While children can surprise us with unexpected gifts which touch our hearts and spirits, they really can’t give us material things. Kathy’s deepest joy came from her relationship with her children and grandchildren. And, in her life of public service, she wanted every child in North Carolina to have the same opportunity as her children and grandchildren. A child is a symbol, a metaphor, of the person in need. Our response to the

needs of others, especially the vulnerable, speaks loudly and clearly of the vision and teachings of Jesus. Jesus gives us a much different perspective and narrative than the one the world and the culture in which we live gives us. It's a narrative which shows us through Jesus' life of compassion and service to others that those who are vulnerable often live and move among relationships, knowing that life is a mystery to be lived, not a problem to be solved.

An advocate for the vulnerable, we come together today knowing that Kathy's life was taken in the most vulnerable of ways. Her story becomes our story because we are so deeply affected by this loss. Our feelings may range from anger to deep sadness to fear to disbelief.

At this time we are keenly aware and tuned in to the gift of life. With painful clarity, we have experienced how quickly our lives can change. We long to understand why something so awful could happen to someone so dear. It has been a week filled with family and friends gathering, and entire communities reaching out in support.

Living in the tension of unanswered questions, this Sanctuary is where we find solace and comfort as we experience our own sense of vulnerability. In this sacred space, we come with all of our emotions to grieve the reality of Kathy's death and to celebrate the mystery and gift of her life. A life that continues in the spirit of each of her children and in the light that shines through her grandchildren's eyes – in Jessica, Paige, Thomas and Jonathan; in Ryan, Ben, Gaines, Hoyt and Nicholas.

To find a place of comfort in this moment of goodbye seems impossible. However, we stand at the threshold of God's kingdom and offer our prayers of thanksgiving for Kathy as she is received into the hands of the One who dreamed and formed her, and whose love surrounds her here today, and whose light shines to guide her home to the loving hand of God.

As Kathy's family and I gathered around her bedside on Tuesday morning, people shared some gifts and blessings they will always cherish about Kathy – and one of the memories shared with a smile and some laughter was that Kathy wasn't always the best person to ask for directions. She would often say, "I know exactly where I'm going. I just can't tell you how to get there!" Her wings were expansive, but she was secure in her roots, grounded in the deep and fertile soil of her faith in God and her commitment to live her life in Christ, promising as we Episcopalians do in our baptisms, to "strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every person." She was fed at the table of the Lord, a table to which all are welcomed today. And she was led by the Spirit. She knew exactly where she was going even if she couldn't tell others how to get there!

The work Kathy did so generously and cheerful in so many different places is, indeed, very significant and will be remembered. We who have worked with her are grateful for the opportunity we have had to know her and be part of her journey. But at the end of the day, as we say goodbye: the Spirit in Kathy Arnold Taft, not the work she did, is what makes her important to us.

Her spirit is with us today. May it embrace us all with a desire to live deeply and fully, an authentic life of care in service to others.

Amen.

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