

Proper 20B
Mark 9:30-37
20 Sept. 2009
Christ Church

Earlier this week when I was driving to the Cathedral for a meeting, I heard Terry Gross interview Ron Powers: the man who assisted senator Ted Kennedy in writing his memoir, “True Compass.”

For most of his adult life, Ted Kennedy was a controversial figure. Many of us thought of him as a pampered, self-centered rich kid whose wealth and family connections kept him in public office despite the shameful events at Chappaquiddick. His well-known political views were always to the left of mainstream American opinion. Many Americans despised him.

Today’s Gospel reading is an indictment of anyone who seeks unbridled power and prestige. Jesus overhears his disciples competing for a place of privilege in the Kingdom of

Heaven. Jesus tells all of them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” And then, Jesus lifts up a little child and says, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.”

I was seven years old when Ted Kennedy’s big brother was elected president. The family I grew up in were not Democrats, but they were Catholic. I suspect that my parents and my uncles and aunts voted for JFK. Having a Catholic elected president was even better than Notre Dame beating Alabama.

As a seven-year old, I related easily to the Kennedys. They had children close to my age, and the president and first lady were such a handsome couple. As I grew in understanding, JFK’s idea of a “Peace Corps” captured my imagination: privileged young Americans giving up a year of their lives to bring practical help to people living in poverty around the world.

The level of hope that this inspired made JFK's assassination all the more devastating. As time began to ease the pain of that tragedy, many people looked to Bobby Kennedy as a kind of consolation prize. And then, when he and Martin Luther King Jr. were killed, it was up to Ted Kennedy to fill the void. But Chappaquiddick permanently crushed Ted Kennedy's reputation and his political future – or so we thought.

Since the recent death of Senator Kennedy, many prominent Republicans have said how they admired and respected him. They even *liked* him. I don't know about you, but I was surprised to hear Orrin Hatch, John McCain, and Nancy Reagan claim Ted Kennedy as a dear friend.

By all accounts, he had a long and successful career in the U. S. Senate, and worked diligently with his colleagues on both sides of the aisle to accomplish much. How did the infamous spoiled brat of the Kennedy family, the shamed man of

Chappaquiddick, become this “other” person? How was he transformed?

According to his Memoir, there *was* a turning point in Kennedy’s life: his son’s battle with cancer.

In the early days of his treatment, Ted’s son, along with a control group of other children, participated in an experimental study funded by a grant. The program seemed a great success, and it inspired hope in the sick children and their parents. In the process, Ted’s family got to know the other families in the program intimately. They spent many an hour in the hospital waiting room sharing their common experiences: small steps forward, and heart-breaking setbacks.

And then, in the middle of the trial, the grant money ran out.

Ted watched as other families, friends who had walked this painful journey with him and his family, had to drop out of the program. Unlike Ted, they could not afford to continue

in the trial. It was at this point that Ted Kennedy, who as a young man had lived a self-indulgent life, dedicated himself to helping the least in society: those who were without resources.

Ted Kennedy was a church-goer all his life. He must've heard the words of Jesus in today's Gospel many times: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."

But there in the hospital waiting room among the sick children, Jesus' words must have entered his heart.

These words of Scripture have transforming power. God works through them, and through our life's experiences, to draw us ever closer to wisdom and insight that are far greater than our own.

Ted Kennedy needed the other parents and children in that waiting room – they were a vital part of his spiritual progress. In much the same way, we here at Christ Church need each other.

Right here among us is a gold mine of life experience: tragedies weathered, knowledge gained, hard lessons painfully learned. And, hope rekindled. Scripture comes alive in our sharings with one another.

Have you ever thought of the people on your pew as spiritual guides and teachers? They are. Do you think of yourself as someone with something important to give? You are.

Jesus asks us to welcome the child he holds in his arms. And this applies to *all* our ministries here: not just teaching Sunday School for our children, but Christian Education for Adults ... Outreach ... Lay Eucharistic Ministry ... Global Missions ... Finance ... Flower Guild ... Altar Guild ... caring for our Building and Grounds ... Communications ... Parish Life ... Choir ... greeting our newcomers and recruiting volunteers.

Think of that child in Jesus' arms as all of us – for we all are God's children. And think of yourself as Christ himself: for we *are* his arms.

Let me invite you, after the service today, to stroll through the many displays of the ministry fair. You may hear Christ's call in a particular way.

Jesus is calling us to heal the world. And that healing starts right here at Christ Church.