

Margaret Cox Memorial Service Sermon

When someone is as beloved as Margaret Cox is, there is definitely a sense of sadness at losing her presence with us on earth. At the same time, when someone is as beloved as Margaret Cox is, there is also a sense of deep gratitude for her, for all her love, and for a life well lived. As her family reflected with me on her life, there were four main themes that emerged: her love for home and family, her love for The Episcopal Church, her love for St. Stephen's, and her love for God. There is plenty of overlap among them as her love flowed through them all.

Her love for home and family came through in her hospitality. Her son Herb remembers the gift she had for preparing delicious meals out of whatever leftovers were in the fridge. Since she had the thrifty habit of saving even small quantities of leftovers, she sometimes served "surprise sandwiches", which might be some leftover ham in one, and some corned beef hash in another: each one was different, so it was always a surprise. Her grandson Mark has fond memories of her crab cakes, her rolls, her cookies, her thanksgiving dinner followed by turkey hash, cranberry sauce in the shape of a turkey with a dollop of mayo. Her habit of never throwing out any food larger than a spoonful, and stretching anything into a meal.

Mark also remembers the family time they spent together: Cards and bridge games after dinner, and nights on the indoor porch. He thinks back to crabbing together and using stinky chicken necks as bait. He remembers the way she took him and his brother David to her friends' houses on the river to swim and play. There were family vacations to Emerald Isle and Nags Head. But there's also the story of Mark's birth. Herb and Evie were living in Germany when he was born. It was during the time that Margaret's husband Hume was rector of St. Stephen's and they were living in the rectory here. The rectory did not have a dishwasher in it. So Hume said he would give her either a ticket to Germany to see her brand new grandson or a dishwasher, and she chose...the dishwasher.

Margaret was also a creative person. Her daughter Dottee remembers, "She was so talented with knitting and quilting; her hands were always busy. Even when she was dying, she knitted a cap for a baby on the way. She's a master knitter. She had a knitting

shop and taught everyone in Emporia how to knit.” She also loved gardening. Her son-in-law Bob remembers her biggest happy time was going to the garden and picking beans. Her daughter-in-law Evie remembers her as a giving person. She didn’t worry about herself or what she wore. She’d be out there pulling weeds no matter what.

In addition to her love for her family, she also had a lifelong love for The Episcopal Church. When she was a young woman, her father was senior warden of their Episcopal Church, and the man she was engaged to was the minister. They waited until Hume was called to the church in Lynchburg to have the wedding. Herb says, “Mother was such a big flagbearer for the Episcopal Church. She was always looking out for other people. Each congregation that got Daddy as their minister felt they were getting two ministers. Father was a great minister, and she was the person who went out and brought people into the church. She made sure the sick had a pot of soup. They were a team.” She was active in a variety of Episcopal Church organizations, including Shrine Mont, the diocesan camp and conference center, and was involved in Episcopal Church Women in a big way too.

Wherever she lived, she was involved in and contributed to a variety of community organizations, such as the Red Cross, the Garden Club, the Cancer Society, groups that made hand crafts. She was thrilled about the Y and its new building. But for her, as Herb says, “Whatever church you belong to, your church is your social center and your friends come from that.” Dottee remembers her dedication to the church every Sunday of her life: “Mama never missed a Sunday at church. There wasn’t any excuse. None of us kids ever missed any Sundays growing up.”

There were plenty of churches she and Hume cared about over the years. Still, Herb reflects, “Of all the churches they belonged to, St. Stephen’s grabbed her heart. The people were giving, and friendly, and warm. She loved this location too.” She loved St. Stephen’s not only emotionally and spiritually, but in devoted action. In her early years here, Margaret restarted the Strawberry Festival. She literally went out into the fields to pick the strawberries and recruited friends to help. She took the house that had been the parish house, and used it to get the St. Stephen’s Thrift Store up and running. She worked as a volunteer in the Thrift Store when she could. She and her husband started the bridge group at the church.

While the split was very painful for her, it brought great comfort to see the congregation of St. Stephen's reestablished here where it belonged. Even when she didn't live in Heathsville, she loved coming back for events. Herb said that many of the sympathy cards he has received are from people who said that they became members of St. Stephen's because of Margaret's influence on them. One of them was Ellen Kirby. She and Bill had visited St. Stephen's for a Sunday service, and then ran into Margaret at Food Lion on Wednesday. Margaret invited them to come to the Lenten program and soup supper that evening. Ellen hesitated, and said she didn't want them to have to make them feed more people than they'd planned on. Margaret persisted, and said she was making potato soup and it would be no problem. Ellen said she didn't want to Margaret to have to go to more work to make even more soup. With her characteristic talent for stretching anything into a meal for guests, Margaret replied, "It's no trouble at all: I'll just add more water!" And so Ellen and Bill came to St. Stephen's, were married here, and have been active at St. Stephen's ever since.

Her love for her family, for the Episcopal Church, and for St. Stephen's were all ways in which she expressed her love of God. What made the most impression on me from my visits with her over the years was how thoroughly she was steeped in prayer and worship, in faith and service, and had been her entire life. It was that lifelong faith that guided her family as they chose the scriptures for her service today.

The first reading from Wisdom says, "The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them...in the eyes of the foolish...their departure was thought to be a disaster...but they are at peace...their hope is full of immortality". Herb chose this passage both because it is so beautiful, and because he knew his mother wasn't fearful of death. She knew that her departure was not a disaster, but that she would be at peace in the hand of God. Evie mentioned that the last verse is a wonderful description of her, her faith, and her relationship with the church, and it is: "Those who trust in God will understand truth, and the faithful will abide with him in love, because grace and mercy are upon his holy ones, and he watches over his elect."

Herb had a similar response to Psalm 121. He said, "Mother had such a strong faith. This looks like she's getting her reward and she's got someone looking out after her. This is very comforting to me."

The passages they chose from Revelation and from John both describe heaven as our home, where God will dwell with us, and where God has prepared a place for us to dwell with God. For someone who loved home and family and hospitality the way Margaret did, it is fitting to picture her in her true home. Dottee said, “It’s what heaven’s going to be. Seeing God, seeing Daddy. It’s just beautiful. She wanted to go home.”

Those of us who grieve for her feel the sadness of that loss, and there’s nothing wrong with that. But for her, as this scripture tells us, God will wipe every tear from her eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more.

Her love for those of us on earth is as strong as it ever was; it is even stronger, because she doesn’t have any of the limitations she had on earth. She continues to love her family, her friends, her community, her church. She continues to love God. It is the love of God that has already prepared a place for her in heaven. Jesus has gone ahead of us through death to his Father’s house where there are many mansions. Not even the most righteous of us can earn the infinite joy of eternity, and the good news of the gospel is that we don’t have to. Jesus provides for us, by the gift of his life, death, and resurrection, the way to the place he has prepared for us. It is our true home, the place where we belong, the place where we are welcomed and loved, the place we gather with those who are dear to us, the place where we are cared for and fed and at peace. As Herb said when he read this passage: “She’s going home and this is it. She knows there’s a place for her.”

What Margaret knew is a gift to all of us. Our earthly lives have their sorrows and struggles, their pain and their losses. And even while we are going through them, we are surrounded by the love of a generous God, who grants us the magnificent capacity to love and to be loved. The pain does not last forever; it is love that is eternal, as eternal as God. As Margaret knew, it is eternal love that welcomes us home.