

Homily preached at the Funeral of Kenneth Kronberg

—The Rev. John Ohmer, Rector St. James' Episcopal Church April 19, 2007

When Molly, Max and I sat down to plan this service, I asked what their wishes for the service were – what they hoped the service would mean for them and for those gathered here. Now most of the time, when I ask that question to a grieving spouse and children, I get something of a blank stare, a shrug of the shoulders – (as if to say) I don't know.

Not with Molly and Max. Without hesitating, really, they answered: okay, #1) – we want this service to reflect Ken, not us. #2) (here I started taking notes) Ken was Jewish, his family's Jewish: even though the service will be held in a church, we want to be mindful of that, respectful of that. #3) besides, practically speaking, all this is kind of moot, because several years ago, during one of those long car rides where the conversation goes everywhere, Ken told Max what he wanted at his funeral: he spelled it out. (Apparently Ken believed that one's funeral is not something one leaves to the vagaries of local clergy and grieving families. So he spelled it out.) And so it is, that we have a funeral service that is all the things Ken was. Or let me at least suggest five traits, or characteristics, of Ken's as found in this service. Number one, Ken was extraordinary. And I mean just that: extra-ordinary, outside the ordinary. I don't know anyone else who would say, in a long car drive with their son, "you know, at my funeral it'd be nice to have Beethoven's Variations for Cello and Piano on 'See the Conqu'ring Hero Comes' from Handel's *Judas Maccabaeus*... And it should be followed by that poem from the Statue of Liberty, don't you think? Extraordinary! And in that Emma Lazarus poem is a clue to a second characteristic of Ken: he could be brusque and gruff – "not like the brazen giant of Greek fame" – we don't want big old Colossus conqueror!, here on our shores we want a woman with a torch, saying, "keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" keep your hoity-toity rich people, we don't want 'em...give us your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, that's who we want. –

(And here, on the inside front cover of our leaflet, in place of the usual gregarious welcome letter, we have Psalm 3, and not just any Psalm 3, but Milton's paraphrase, so the first words we're greeted with this afternoon are "Lord, how many are my foes, How many those That in arms against me rise... ..[R]ise Lord, save me my God, for thou Hast smote ere now On the cheek-bone all my foes. Of men abhor'd Hast broke the teeth." A little different from our normal, "Good afternoon and welcome to St. James! We're so glad you're here!") Brusque, and gruff, and yet... a third characteristic of Ken: at the same time he could be so patient, and such a patient student, such a patient editor, midwife-ing a good idea. And a patient teacher: by his request, we're going to hear Max read us Shelly's *Ode to the West Wind*... and no, not just the first and last stanzas, but all 70 lines. In his life, and now even in his death, Ken is casting a vote of confidence in his students, confident in Max's ability to read poetry, and in our ability to hear it. Which

brings me to the fourth characteristic of Ken. He was a poet. (He's way too introverted to allow any of his own poetry to be read today), but he saw the world through a poet's eyes, experienced life through with a poet's heart. And so no funeral leaflet of his would be complete without a Shakespeare Sonnet on the back cover... a sonnet about love's fire. The fire of love that heats water And water cannot cool... a sonnet ending with "water cools not love." And therefore -- it's no coincidence -- that Ken's funeral leaflet ends with that line... what is the last word Ken leaves us with? Love.

And that brings me to my assigned passage, and Ken's fifth and final, and most important characteristic: love, and Paul's remarkable hymn to love, first Corinthians 13. It's a well-known passage, a passage you often hear read at weddings. And it's a remarkable passage, all the more remarkable when we remember the context in which it was written. Paul wrote the letter to the Christians living in Corinth around the year AD 54 – over 1,950 years ago. Corinth was, at that time, one of, if not the, largest and most important towns in Greece. Very important Seaport Garrison town Strategic road-juncture Capital of the Roman province Filled with a cosmopolitan crowd. "Corinth" back then was a synonym for power, decadence, opulence... in other words, imagine taking all the power struggles of Washington, DC, and the wealth of Manhattan; all the opulence of Hollywood, all the decadence of Las Vegas; and combining them—and you've got a pretty good idea of Corinth.

So Paul writes to these people; it is a wake-up call, a call to self-examination and repentance. So much of the other chapters of 1st Corinthians are filled with explicit and stern instruction and direction ... Paul criticizes their sexual immorality, their arrogance, their litigiousness and complacency, their irreverence and pride and lifestyle. He's very direct! But then he says this: You know, if I say all these things in the most convincing way possible – "though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels," – if I am the most eloquent person in the world, but have not charity, have not agapē, don't do it with love, it's not eloquent. Eloquence delivered without love makes the same sound as a sounding brass, or tinkling, clanging cymbal – ...the sound of fingernails on a blackboard, Eloquence without love is nothing but obnoxious noise.

(He goes on to say) If have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and have all knowledge – If I have the wisdom of Solomon, the intellect of Einstein, if I have nine PhDs and have published fifteen books – but don't have love, I am nothing. It doesn't matter. If I have all faith so as to move mountains – if I have all the faith of Mother Teresa, and give away all I have in solidarity with the poor, if I hand over my body and become a martyr, but have not charity, it profiteth me nothing: it doesn't help. The love of which Paul speaks is slow to lose patience, and is kind. It does not envy. It vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, seeketh not her own. Love does not violate individuality, is not easily provoked, looks for ways of being constructive, is not irritable, or touchy, it beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things; it never faileth. Some time ago, Ken told Molly and Max something very significant, that shed light not only on his life, but on his death, and the manner of his death: he said, I used to believe that conflict – attacking everyone all the time – was the way of the universe. I now know that the universe is run by love. *When the values you are surrounded by are in*

*conflict with the principles you believe in, it causes pain.* For most of us, that pain is tolerable: For Ken, it must have become intolerable...too much. Ken, like the rest of us, saw through a glass darkly. He knew so much: he was such an extraordinary person; he was, even in his gruffness, patient. He was “glad to learn and glad to teach.” He was a poet, and until the very end... he had faith, and he had hope, and he had love. But the greatest of these is love. A love that was poured into his heart, generously given to others, and passed on to Molly and Max. Water cools not love. Death cools not love. Nothing cools love: The last word is love.