

Church of the Good Shepherd and St. John the Evangelist

December 16, 2006
Fr. Bill McGinty

Richard Sherman Vernon

Let me welcome all of you, on behalf of Janine and Maize and the Vernon family, to this memorial service for Richard. To all of you who have traveled a great distance, to those from the Met., the City and Scarsdale, we welcome you to Richard's home parish of Good Shepherd and St John the Evangelist.

This is also our opportunity to remember Richard and as a Christian family to celebrate his life. Like many of you, taken by the sudden event of December 2nd, we have waited to mourn him and also to thank God for his life and what he has meant to us.

In the celebrated movie: "A River Runs Through It", the Brad Pitt character turns to his tardy and wayward cousin and says: "In this part of the country, there are three things we are never late for: Church, Work and Fishing." I can't but help think today that he could well have been talking about Richard Vernon.

For all of us gathered here today have basked in Richard's friendship, experienced his humor and enjoyed his ruthless honesty.

I can remember the first time I ever went to dinner with Richard and Janine. The girls had gone into the kitchen to clean up. Searching for something to say, I came out with the only thing I knew about Opera. I said: "I hear that Pavarotti's voice is in sad decline over the last few years. Richard put down his fork, looked at me and said: "Well, Fr. Bill, I sang with him last year and he sounded pretty good to me!"

If there is a common denominator that runs through all our thoughts of Richard surely it is, that we all knew we were in the company of a gentleman, a humble, but great talent, and a person who treated others with dignity and respect.

Yet, he was a lot of fun, with a great wit and a dry and wining sense of humor. It was a great combination. And to all of us in his home town, he was a loving and a loveable man.

Richard's values ran deep. They were steeped in his southern roots and what he inherited from his father and Maizie. He had an uncommon ability for making genuine and enduring friendships. He managed to do so without compromising his own beliefs or expecting anyone to desert theirs.

Yet, few of us here today, with the exception of his family and a few longtime friends such as Ron and Nicole, were party to the many sides of his life.

Certainly, all of you who shared work, music and the theatre with Richard, have stories and highlights of his career that we in our little town could only guess at. Those friendships and collaborations go back some twenty years and more.

And we have among us today friendships that go back further than that to Memphis and College days. Richard never had the need to tell of his achievements and we here in Milford were content with a man who was content with himself. Here among these rolling hills of Pennsylvania, he made his home and here we knew him as a friend, a great son and a part of a wonderful love story.

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It was here that Richard, Janine and Maize came to church each Sunday unless Matthew was dragging them off to sing with the choir in Scarsdale. Here you would find him building the Nativity set, painting walls and cleaning up after Flea Markets. He was at home in our midst in jeans, workshirt and sneakers. If you asked him what he was doing, he would tell you: “Fr. Bill, you only get out of something what you put into it.”

He was deeply involved in the recovery of this church, which had suffered some lean times. More than anything he believed that it could grow with the right sort of effort and leadership. He believed that one day, it would return great and beautiful church music to this area. As the new pastor, I felt and appreciated that support and the friendship that went with it. O I dearly tested it once or twice, allowing the Blue Grass Band to play one liturgy a month! He endured that, but he told me: “Just one verse of Yumbaya and I’m outta here!”

Richard had a vision, a vision that Janine and many of us in the parish have shared. It is a vision that a better America begins right here in our small towns and among our families. He allowed himself to be challenged by the Gospel of Jesus Christ his Lord to extend that vision to all, be they poor, handicapped or less fortunate. He believed in diversity and welcomed all through these doors that we might share and celebrate our common humanity, irrespective of creed, culture, advantage, gay, straight or race.

In all the years I have known Richard, I don’t think I ever heard him say anything bad about anyone. With the possible exception of Andrew Lloyd Weber and Andrea Bocelli.

All of us who worked on projects with him, found in him a teacher, a guide, a willing compass and a discerning mind. The words of scripture and the teaching of his Lord forced him to live out his life in a particular way. He could not pay lip service to them. He took his faith and beliefs seriously and he sought to make a difference. And like so many other things in his life, he succeeded.

I once asked Richard about the stress of driving to the city and back every day. He thought for a moment and replied: “I don’t let that bother me. We all have to die sometime. I believe that we are all here for a purpose and it certainly will not be forever.”

The readings Janine chose for today’s service all epitomize some aspect of Richard’s life and character. From Paul writing to Timothy charging him to proclaim what he truly believes in. People need to hear the truth. Richard was no stranger to truth. Whether he was performing or talking politics about the land that he loved, he was a man of truth. If anyone could lay claim to what Paul called “The Crown of Righteousness”, for finishing the race, then it was Richard.

In Roman’s Paul asks: “Who will separate us from the love of God?” Richard could not be separated from his friends or family or his wonderful Janine. He was a constant in all their lives.

Our Gospel today has us return to that little house in Bethany, where Jesus spent so many evenings with his friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus. So many of you spent

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evenings like that around Richard's table, or in the Green Room or a Fishing Cabin far to the North.

In the story Jesus returns because his friend Lazarus is dead. His sister says to him: "I know I will see him again at the Resurrection on the last day."

But Jesus shakes his head and replies: "I am the resurrection, he who believes in me, will live forever."

Richard was a man who made us all believe in Resurrection. He made you believe that America was not such a bad place. He made you believe in the power of great music. He made you believe in love because of the great love he showed for his family and his partner Janine. Even in death, he has us wanting to see him again. Perhaps that was the measure of the man. He made us want to linger and he made us feel better about ourselves.

To all of you who were his friends, and to all of you who loved him, we are all better for it. Let us cherish his memory, celebrate his life and the way he lived it. Today, we thank Maize for sharing a son and we thank Janine for allowing us to share in the life of her wonderful man.

May he rest – amid the heavenly choirs, till Resurrection unites us all once more.

Amen+