

**Funeral for Joe Sheedy
May 21, 2010**

We are here to bid farewell to a good man, a good father, a good friend. We are here to say good-bye to Joseph Edward Sheedy, to commend him to God, and to let him go on into his eternal life in Christ.

This is not an easy thing to do. I don't believe that any of us were even thinking about bidding farewell to Joe when he had that large and ultimately fatal stroke on April 23. He had just been by the church office that morning, bringing us a bag of popcorn ... of course. He said at the time that he wasn't feeling well and was going home to rest. One week later, after watching and hoping that he might recover, it was clear that Joe's time here was over, and he slipped away, quickly, quietly, and with not a lot of fuss.

That was how Joe lived his life – quietly and without a lot of fuss. But with an expansive and generous heart that encompassed – it sometimes seemed – the whole of East Lansing. He knew everybody, and everybody knew Joe, “The Popcorn Man.” You never knew when he would turn up with that trademark brown paper bag filled with the best popcorn in the world ... at the MSU credit union, at Citizen's Bank, at Meijer's – where they begged him to keep making it for their employee break room – here at church, downstairs at Abbot Nursery School.

But if you wanted to find him, you knew where to look. At Playmakers, where his retirement turned into a fulfilling job. Here in our church kitchen on Sunday mornings, setting out an unparalleled coffee hour feast week after week. On the sidelines at the MSU women's basketball games. At meetings of the East Lansing Historical Society. Enjoying the sounds of the Spartan Marching Band. Joe was everywhere, it seemed.

Joe did many things quietly and without a lot of fuss. For many years, he came by this church every single night to be sure the doors were locked and the lights were off. He was our pledge secretary and chief counter, and he knew more about this church's finances than anyone else. I can tell you it has taken four to six strong men to take his place figuring out how to account for our Sunday offerings and regular pledges!

He also was the abiding presence downstairs, in our kitchen. Since his wife Mary Lou's death in 1997, Joe did not like coming upstairs into the "big church". There were too many memories up here, and even to come up for communion was to see Mary Lou immortalized in our needlepoint kneelers at the altar rail. She's over there, on that kneeler, playing tennis, of course. So instead, Joe spent his Sundays downstairs in the kitchen, making coffee, setting up a social hour spread that included his own popcorn, plus all sorts of other treats and snacks. That he purchased himself. And for which he never, ever, ever asked to be reimbursed.

It was his gift, his way of "making church" downstairs, while we were "making church" upstairs. He did listen to the service over the speakers that we have downstairs, and he would sometimes talk to me later about something I had said in a sermon. But Joe had his own ministry, his own holy work to do, his own way of showing Christ's love to the people who gather here week after week for worship.

And it has struck me, in the weeks since his death, that in his own way, Joe was as much a priest of the church as I am. Let me explain. Joe was baptized into Christ's body. Our service today is a celebration of that baptism ... that he is part of a life larger than his own, an eternal sharing in the life of God. That is why we do not fear to commend him into God's loving embrace. God has always held Joe. God named him and claimed him in the waters of baptism, and that love, that naming, that claiming goes on and never, ever stops.

But part of being baptized into Christ's Body is taking up your share in Christ's priesthood. We even say this as part of our baptismal services. The congregation says to the newly baptized – "We receive you into the household of God. Confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection, and share with us in his eternal priesthood." All of us have our own part of Christ's priestly ministry, which is a ministry of hospitality, reconciliation, forgiveness, love, and care for God's beloved world.

Joe's priestly ministry was to spread a table downstairs, just as I spread a table upstairs. To prepare a feast that echoed and continued the Eucharistic feast that we celebrate every week here at this altar. Up here, we use a silver cup and silver plate, wafers, bread and wine. Downstairs, Joe used a pressure cooker and coffee maker, popcorn and oil and salt.

The sacrament starts here, but it doesn't end here. It is carried out into the world in every person who receives it. It is enacted by each one of us in the way we love and care for each other, for our community, for the strangers among us. Joe shared with us in Christ's eternal priesthood, offering coffee and popcorn, a place to meet and be met, a free and friendly space where the stranger was welcomed and where old friendships were strengthened. And carrying that Christly love out into East Lansing, in the form of little brown bags of the best popcorn on earth, a gift – unasked for and unexpected – appearing on counters and tables and desks all over this town.

"In my father's house are many dwelling-places," Jesus tell his friends in the gospel lesson. I believe that is true. And I also believe that one of those dwelling places has a kitchen. With a pressure cooker. And the right kind of oil, and the right kind of salt, and a 50 pound bag of popcorn. And that a big bowl of crisp, salty, popcorn is being served at the heavenly banquet. And that at that banquet table a place is set, prepared and ready for that good and faithful servant, Joseph Edward Sheedy.