Eulogy for Roberta Martens, delivered on August 10, 1998

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EULOGY FOR

ROBERTA MARTENS

August 10, 1998

We met Bobbie for the first time at a Christmas party in 1969. My first significant memory of her comes from the following summer when I preached at the Lakeshore Chapel in Douglas. Bert persuaded me to take the assignment at the Christmas party, and Bobbie and Bert made it an event for Nancy and me. They made their summer cottage a special place for family and friends, and we discovered that on a beautiful summer day. We were new to Grand Rapids, and they made us their friends. When Bobbie and Bert brought you to their cottage where Bert fixed you a drink and Bobbie spread before you a feast to remember, you were initiated. You were in the Martens’ orbit and you never left it. And you cherished it.

That first day was repeated in following years, a day that spun out on the beach and often reached into the evening. As I thought about that place with the light reflected through the trees, with its typical cottage like atmosphere, infused with Martens like enthusiasm, openness, and love, I saw it as a family place, where I imagined childhood memories for Si and Skip that were formative for their lives – a place where family bonds developed. Those of us outside the family who were brought in became in some respects part of the extended family. You might not see
Bobbie and Bert for a long time, but when you did you were theirs, you fit in, there was nothing to guard.

Bobbie could envelop you with her good spirits, with her good humor, and with her enjoyment of having you around. She had an aura. I’m sure she had her down times, but around her always shone a positive light. We all saw it. We all basked in it from time to time.

Like everyone, Bobbie had roles and relationships. I didn’t observe her daughter-parent relationship or a sibling one. I observed her as a mother. I thought her mother instincts were good. I know Si and Skip, not because we have had much opportunity to be together, but through their mother. The mother characteristics she could apply to other people and situations as well. This she did when it was needed and when it was appropriate.

You could not describe a better friend. Bobbie was an interested and active friend. Nothing was feigned. She initiated and she received. What she received she always appreciated. She had a special quality for appreciation and a large capacity for it. We have all observed that, and we all have had it directed towards us. And we were never neglected. Whenever Bobbie called or we called, whenever our friendship was actively engaged, I had the feeling that in her heart there was a place for us. This was an active place. It was a living place. I reached this conclusion while considering our relationship as I prepared these remarks. She had
these places for all of her friends. Friendships were, of course, social, but for her they were more than that. They lived in her heart where subconsciously and consciously they affected her life almost daily, enriching her and her friends.

All of us know how good she could be in relationships, and each of us is grateful for what we received from her. At the same time, we know that her greatest specialty in relationship was marriage. Bert waited a long time before he married. He was 36. When he and Bobbie found each other, they experienced from the beginning and through the years commitment to each other, enjoyment of one another, romance, and total love. The ideal can be described, but seldom lived. They lived it in their marriage. Let me read to you a letter Bert wrote to God. Si thinks it was written shortly before his parents were married. Bert was not easily inhibited so it’s not surprising that he went right to the top when he wanted to express himself. It was written on a Wednesday on stationary from the Hecht Co. in Washington, DC. “Dear God – Please allow me to live thirty-six years longer than you originally planned so that I may make up for the years I did not know her. I love her so very much. Please sir? Signed – B.” God must have been receptive for Bert lived into his 90’s. Maybe a few years were taken off the 36 for addressing God as Sir. The intensity of love manifest in this letter never abated for either of them.
In preparation for this eulogy to Bobbie, I reread my remarks delivered at Bert’s memorial service. I said of Bert, “Yours is a spirit that elicits kindness, generosity, and good humor from others because you possess those qualities in abundance. Wherever you are, wherever you have passed by, life is brighter and happier for your presence. There is a constant striving to be civilized and human....” This is a mirror image of Bobbie. If marriage is supposed to make two people one, the formula worked for them. Let me repeat what I said about Bobbie and Bert at an earlier time. “Together they lived and defined what marriage should be. All who have good marriages still can benefit by observing and reflecting on what Bobbie and Bert had together. It was love with the right combination of sentimentality and practicality. It was undeniable loyalty and fidelity. It was companionship, a sharing of mutual enjoyments. They were lovers and friends with a formula for being both that worked.” Certainly this was her specialty, and the center of her life. It was so important to her that life after Bert was really biding time. She kept contact with friends. We received a flow of kindness, yet I think she was involved in a waiting game; waiting for Bert, no hastening, but no measures to hinder either. She lived in the hope of reuniting in spirit. She had faith that it would happen, and in the happening she would be eternally joined in the love that illuminated her life. For me, this is a personal story, a story that illustrates what St. Paul was writing about to the Corinthians. It’s theology in action. Si told me that
Bobbie’s final words were, “Bert is coming for me now, and I will be with him forever.” Do we need to know more about love than that to have some understanding of its power?

Knowing how to relate, love, and help another person in an intimate relationship may be life’s highest accomplishment. Bobbie achieved in that realm. It is her greatest legacy. Tradition and poetry celebrate love like hers. From the Song of Solomon to this day, literature, history, and music tell tales of love and passion. We all know of Romeo and Juliet, a flowering commitment, barely consummated; of Heloise and Abelard, a true story of medieval passion, brutally altered; and Aida and Rademes united in a premature entombment. Bobbie and Bert were just two middle class, Midwestern Americans like most of us; nothing too dramatic about that. But their feelings for each other were intertwined like the great loves of literature, history, and music. Someone ought to write an epic poem about Bobbie and Bert – a poem with a happy ending.