

***Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.” (JAMES 1: 17.)***

I want to thank Mary for the opportunity to offer a brief reflection on Neil and his legacy at St. Peter's. It is the purest blessing of my ministry to have had Neil Keen as a precious colleague and friend over 16 years. I can only begin here to give thanks to Almighty God for it.

42 years is a long time to serve as Choirmaster. It speaks volumes of Neil's heart and nature. Neil represented the very best of this parish. He embodied the goodly tendency of St. Peter's toward tradition and stability. He helped to foster it and preserve it. We need to honor Neil in no small part for the gift of stability he embodied and how that blessed us with a beautifully nuanced and rich choir culture. What a profound gift for any of us to have been able to occupy even a chapter in that time. James says, there is “no variation or shadow due to change” in the Father of lights. Neil showed us a most precious form of it.

There is an understandable tendency when speaking of Neil to focus on his immense talent as a musician. I can only join the chorus of those who will do so today. Yet isn't it the soul of Neil that needs most to be honored in doing so? It seems so to me, because his immense musical gift came from a place of spiritual depth that is hard to plumb or capture. One can only point at it like a witness. It came from his ability to penetrate all the way to the bottom. He knew what was at the deepest place and could bring it up to the surface like a deep-sea diver hands off a treasure to the crew above.

This gift was evident the first time I met Neil and only revealed itself more profoundly throughout my 16 years at St. Peter's. On our choir trip to Oxford, the Dean said flatly that St. Peter's Choir was the best visiting choir he had experienced. He meant it. It was because Neil captured fully the soul of the English sacred choral tradition and added, without compromising it one inch, a certain sweetness born of this side of the pond.

Not a sentimental sweetness, but a worthy religious one that could only be given equal standing. Neil alone could deliver it. Thank God we have recordings that capture it for posterity.

One would imagine that a talent such as Neil's would make a man more than a little proud. But a talent such as Neil's could not come from such a place. It was utterly foreign to him. There was a goodness and humility in Neil that was so utterly, almost painfully, attractive. You wanted to hug him – which would have embarrassed him horribly – just to get close to it.

Neil built a choir family at St. Peter's. In fact, he was the father of many treble generations. Neil could get the most amazing things out of our kids and they adored him. Adults likewise thrived under Mr. Keen's uncanny ability to crack the combination of every chorister's lock. Neil bore the choir in his heart and defined conscientiousness. In a very real sense, Neil was the rector of a congregation and was excellent at their pastoral care. Please know that each of you was special to him. Neil knew you always as individuals with unique gifts of temperament and ability. Neil was your fiercest defender. He bore you in his heart. St. Peter's Choir can honor him most in one way, to preserve and to treasure the inheritance you received at his hands. I know that you will.

Neil fought the good fight, he finished the race. God gives us different courses to run. For Neil it was the race to glorify God through our tradition of sacred music and to stay always on course. It was to offer stability in the complex emotional landscape of church choirs with humor, gentleness, and kindness. It was to honor each soul in honoring each voice. He finished the race with honor and true humility. Neil never separated the music from the spiritual power it conveyed. I know St. Peter's will carry on in Neil's way. Not simply to honor the person, which Neil would not want, but to honor the gift of Neil given by God. And it was God who gave it, there can be no doubt. Now Neil's inheritance resides in you. There is no greater legacy.

One final thought comes to me. There was no pretense or self-promotion ever in Neil. When I think of the true meaning of "blessed are the pure of

heart,” Neil comes at once to mind. May we always most remember and cherish Neil’s soul, which was his greatest offering to us. It was his perfect gift to us and there is no greater gift. To God be the glory. Amen.