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### Senator Kennedy's Faith in America

Senator Edward Kennedy had faith in America. He had faith in what he called "the guiding star of liberty and justice for all." However, America was not his god and Americanism was not his religion. Patriotism is a good thing. A devotion to one's country is a virtue that ought to be a constitutive element of our citizenship. Senator Kennedy's flawed life exhibited the virtues of faith, hope and love. It is right to love one's country. However, we err when our patriotism makes the nation, its interests its politics and economics our ultimate concern.

Christian theologian Paul Tillich warned against making the nation our ultimate concern. This is because the nation is not ultimate, and to think that it is can only lead to existential disappointment. I say: we can love our country, but the country does not love us back. Our sister and brother citizens love us back as we have loved them.

This is what we saw in the outpouring of affection and grief for Senator Kennedy. People he had touched in public and private ways remembered. His list of legislative achievement is long, and the common thread that runs through them all is an expansion of the blessings of liberty. These laws brought people from the margins closer to the center of American life. They were acts of love.

Kennedy's love of country was not a blind, mindless, uncritical love. True love, radical love that loves even enemies, is not sightless. It sees the faults, limitations, strengths and weaknesses of the beloved clearly. Kennedy saw America clearly.

In his now famous 1979 interview with Roger Mudd, when asked why he wanted to be president, his halting answer came after a pause. Conventional wisdom holds that his answer was evidence that he had no clear reason for running. I say: it was a good answer, but not an answer that America wanted to hear.

We like to hear that we are the best, that there is an ontological goodness about who we are as a nation. We like talk about American exceptionalism that declares that the United States is exceptionally blest by God and ordained by divine ordination to lead the world. Ronald Reagan talked of morning in America.

In his answer to Mudd's question, Kennedy told the nation that the United States was not the best. He pointed out America's strengths: natural resources, an educated population, technology, a capacity for innovation and a strong political system. At the same time, with all of this, Kennedy said most industrial nations were doing a better job with productivity, inflation, energy and unemployment. He reiterated his faith in the country to do better.

Today, as we debate the cause of his life, universal health care, we still hear lawmakers speak about the healthcare system in the United States as the best in the world. This is not true. The United States does not rank in the top twenty according to a study by the World Health Organization. France is ranked number one, and its system is a system with both government and private components. There are both government and privately controlled medical facilities. Private supplemental insurance is available. Healthcare is universal.

Kennedy wanted the nation to be clear and committed to working toward truly being the best. His faith was in America's ability to achieve this. It was a faith that he also saw among America's people. In his 1980 speech before the Democratic Convention he said: "Together a President and the people can make a difference. I have found that faith still alive wherever I have traveled across this land."

Kennedy had a faith in America, but he infused that faith in liberty and justice for all with the moral content of the teachings of Jesus. He also spoke of hope. In that same speech, he spoke of a new hope for a fair society and this includes universal healthcare. Faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love.