

Commentary: Barbara Bush's old-fashioned religion

April 25, 2018

(RNS) — Barbara Bush, who died April 17 in Houston, always seemed a little old-fashioned to me. But it wasn't until a few days ago, when news broke that the former first lady was dying, at age 92, that she seemed old.

Like other aspects of her persona, Bush had an old-fashioned sort of religious faith.

It wasn't the old-time religion of gospel revivals, but rather the old-line faith of her Episcopal Church.

When I was a boy and Bush was first lady, she reminded me of a lot of the older women I knew in my church: They all had white hair, classic jewelry and matronly dresses. From a distance, they seemed prim and proper and, well, old-fashioned. But once you got to know them, you realized they were caring and funny.

Barbara Bush seemed to embody the virtues of womanhood promoted in 20th-century American Protestantism: loyalty, duty and family. Appearances were important, but in the end character mattered more.

In 1945, Barbara Pierce married an ambitious war veteran and Yale man. She was a U.S. senator's daughter-in-law. Expectations for her must have been remarkably high.

The Bushes nurtured their faith and their young family in Houston's St. Martin's Episcopal Church, where her funeral was held.

The Rev. Russ Levenson Jr., rector at St. Martin's, recalled the Bushes' decades of participation in the life of the congregation: "President Bush

was a very active lay leader in his early years here. But it was not uncommon to see him serving coffee on Sunday morning. Both of them taught in our Sunday school program. Both of them have been involved in our outreach ministries.”

Famous for being the wife of one president and the mother of another, she was also a distant relative of President Franklin Pierce.

But her familial intimacy with the presidency goes even deeper. Another of her sons campaigned unsuccessfully for the office. She was the matriarch of a family in which each member had to grapple with the demands of fame, media attention and public scrutiny.

That’s a tall order, and something she scarcely could have imagined even as a young wife and mother in Houston society in the 1950s, before her husband became a congressman.

Yet by all accounts, Barbara Bush met the obligations of her public and private lives with dignity and grace, sustained by her Christian faith.

In her youth, Christianity was both more ubiquitous and more private than it is today. She certainly did not have to answer reporters’ questions about how faith influenced her family or her politics.

The former first lady’s faith was evident in how she recalled her late daughter, Robin, who died of leukemia in 1953, two months before her fourth birthday. “Robin to me is a joy. She is like an angel to me, and she’s not a sadness or a sorrow,” Mrs. Bush said in 2012.

Indeed, her deep faith was a constant source of strength and inspiration for her, just as it was for all the church ladies I knew growing up.

One son, George W. Bush, famously embraced a more evangelical Protestantism, while another, Jeb, followed his wife into the Catholic

Church. Barbara and George H.W. Bush never strayed from their Episcopal roots, reflecting the same loyalty and constancy that marked their 73-year marriage.

And when mourners said their final goodbye at St. Martin's, the Episcopal Church's funeral liturgy served as a fitting metaphor for the woman herself: traditional, dignified and wonderfully old-fashioned.

A frequent commentator on religion and politics, Jacob Lupfer is a writer and consultant in Baltimore. His website is www.jacoblupfer.com. Follow him on Twitter at @jlupf. The views expressed in this commentary do not necessarily represent those of Religion News Service or the Baptist Standard.