



# TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*on the Branford Green*

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

## ***Lenten Dialogues from the Desert #3***

The Rev. Sharon K. Gracen and Marlisa Mills

March 6, 2016

Rev. Sharon - The parable of the prodigal son is one of the richest bits of scripture that we have. It's a story of growing up, growing in wisdom and grace. It's a story of forgiveness, the ability to forgive self and others and how hard that is. Did the prodigal son know who he was before he left home? He certainly did by the time he came home. His journey took him from the high life to the deep desert. This morning, Marlisa Mills has agreed to share her story of a not unsimilar journey. She is a fairly new, but now firmly entrenched, member of Trinity as the new Chair of our Outreach Ministry and guiding spirit in our refugee discernment. She is the Director of Bereavement and Family Services at CT Hospice, a former church organist and a true daughter of the South.

Marlisa - I received my first breast cancer diagnosis in December of 2000. I shouldn't have been surprised, it runs through my family in several directions. But I was surprised when a routine mammogram ended up as a lumpectomy and 6 treatments of radiation. I never missed a day of work and acted as if it were all less than nothing. You see, I come from a family that was dedicated to proposition that above all, life must look perfect. I was the perfect blond haired singing cherub and convinced myself I was and ever would be. We believed that if you don't deal with something, it simply doesn't exist. Apparently my body knew differently because in December 2002 I received the same diagnosis, a lump in the exact same place. My doctor looked at me and said, "now this is what we're going to do.." he described radical surgery and chemo and the need to do it now. I looked at him and said, "Oh no, we're not," walked out, went back to work and did nothing.

Rev. Sharon - Once having convinced his father to hand over a significant portion of wealth, the prodigal son proceeded to live a life that looked perfect - at least to him. He partied, he played, he lived without a care. He paid no attention to the wreckage of his relationships at home or the finite nature of his fortune. Of course, it all came crashing down on him when the money ran out. There was no way to put a gloss of perfection on hunger and homelessness. The most telling and poignant line of this story is "But when he came to himself..." When he finally said, "O my God, look what I have done."

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Marlisa - What I had done was to ignore 14 years of suppressed anger and betrayal. You see, when I was 31, my mentor, boss and best friend, who was also my husband's business partner, raped me. My husband, not wanting to lose his wonderful partner, told me that I should forget about it, after all, how bad could it have been? We were divorced immediately thereafter but locked into the perpetual prison of shared custody of our daughter. I knew that he was capable of just disappearing with her so I had to play his game anyway. I was molten resentment and rage on the inside but perfect composure on the outside. The truth was that I had lost my ability to trust anyone, I cut off relationships and ignored my migraines. I pushed everything and everyone away and created this big empty space inside of me. But nature abhors a vacuum and eventually filled it with cancer - the physical manifestation of resentment.

And then, on a trip to Maine with an equally wounded friend, I came to myself. I knew that it was time. On a lark we visited a real estate office and rented a house in the deepest woods of Maine. We went home, closed up our houses and packed. I cashed in my 401K and off we went, stopping only to buy a puppy, Strudel the schnauzer, don't ask me why. We stayed for 2 years, both of us working on our stuff in our own way. In the wintertime we brought groceries in by sled because nothing else could get through. The snow was often 4' deep and you may have noticed that I'm not a whole lot taller than that. The only people we ever saw were the ice fishermen and of course, moose. I didn't exactly have a plan but knew that I would need structure so I hiked and wrote, every day. Strudel and I canoed and kayaked all around the lake, learning every inch and detail of water's edge. We were silent watchers of the glory of the seasons. After a couple of months, I knew it was time to really start the work, I knew that if I was going to come out of this alive, I'd have to go deep. The therapist in me knew how to do it, for someone else. I floundered. Until, on a lark, I applied to a Fine Arts school and the process included writing an autobiography. At the bottom of the form was this line; "PS, it has to be true."

Rev. Sharon - Truth is the subtext of the desert. We don't go there to keep lying to ourselves. We go to surrender to who we truly are and to rediscover the child of God that has been hidden within the perfect mannequin that we think we have to be. In the desert we learn that God is ok with messy and imperfect - God likes authenticity, false perfection, not so much. The runaway son came home imperfect, humble and wiser, not expecting anything but hoping.

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Marlisa - My oncologist had told me that I had no choice. I knew that I did and I never doubted what I was doing in the wilds of Maine. I knew that the secret to my healing lay in my own heart. At times I feared that I would die before I figured it all out. As I wrote and rewrote my autobiography, I came face to face with all of the falsehoods that I had been told and the ones that I told myself. I reached the point where I could look in the mirror and see the screwed up, violated, divorced 50 year old mother that I was rather than the former cute cherub performing for approval. What was the most surprising was that I could love this real me.

I worked to finish my writing. The autobiography, the story of the real me, was joined by stacks of letters, lots of "I'm sorry" letters for the people I had pushed away and hurt in the process and letters of forgiveness, including one for my ex-husband and one his business partner. And finally it was time to leave the exquisite solitude of Maine and reenter the messy world. As I packed up, including the seven sets of Maine dishes that I hadn't been able to resist, I knew what I had done, my finances were now a disaster but my spirit had been healed. I was not the same woman who had run away to Maine. I cried from Maine to Pennsylvania but during the last leg of the trip back to NC, I knew I was ready. One of the first things I did was to go for a mammogram, my first in years because I had to know. When my doctor saw that there was nothing to see, he assumed that he had made a mistake before. But then he compared and saw the cancer that had been there was replaced with the health and wholeness that I had achieved.

My ex-husband sat and listened as I read the two letters to him and in a miraculous moment said "You're absolutely right and I am sorry." The empty spaces that had been created by pain and anger, which were now clear of cancer and self-deception, were just waiting for the rest of my life. I made a conscious choice to fill them with love and humor and good relationships. I had developed a real desire to live in New England and once my business with NC was finally finished I did it. And here I am, whole and wiser, still paying for my two years in Maine but ok with that. What I've learned is that we think that what happens to us defines us but what really defines us is how we think about those things. I would have ever learned who I really am without the pain and the very clever chess moves of the Spirit to send me into the desert to find myself. Christian mystic Meister Eckhart said "if the only prayer you ever pray is "thank you," that will be enough." So I stand here today and pray, thank you.

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