



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

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

Little Gidding

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

August 17, 2014

I have been working hard on my recuperation and part of that has been a bit of a media purge - I've cut way down on the amount of violence that surrounds me, choosing carefully what news and entertainment I allow on any screen. But you can't try to stay up with what's going on in the world without being assaulted by violence regularly. The events of this week have been disturbing, all around. The Middle East, from Palestine to Bagdad is smoldering. While there is an uneasy pause in the destruction in Gaza, it's hard to read that story through rose-colored glasses.

The new threat to stability in the Middle East is a new player - or at least a new name for some old players - the Islamic State has developed strength rapidly and is rampaging through Syria and Iraq, capturing territory, destroying historic sites, targeting groups of people for extermination and intending a fundamentalist theocracy should they gain control. We have recommenced military action in Iraq, who knows whether we will send troops again.

And then there is Ferguson, MO. When we elected our first black president, race was back on the radar screens of our cultural consciousness. There have been attempts to dismiss race as a factor in many circumstances but Ferguson is forcing us to accept that there are some pretty hardened hearts and stubborn blindness when it comes to seeing Christ in a black face. Fear has been wearing a whole lot of body armor in Ferguson, armed to the teeth and convinced that the black residents of that Midwestern suburb are dangerous animals. One quote I saw this week reminded us of the difference between the military and the police is that soldiers have enemies but police have communities. As police around the country have become militarized in equipment and attitude, the members of the communities, particularly if they are black, are treated like the enemy. That is not what the founders of this nation envisioned. It's not what the one we follow stands for.

All of these stories have a direct line to the Gospel today. In a rather uncomfortable parable, Jesus explains to his disciples in rather graphic terms that notions of purity - what makes one clean or unclean - are wrong. He said that they were looking in the wrong place to understand what defiles a person. It's not eating with unwashed hands, or eating the wrong food on the wrong day, or coming into contact with blood, it is what comes out of the heart. Every problem that results in violence comes from a fearful or angry heart. Our humanity needs to be redeemed from this hardness of heart.

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I have taken refuge in T.S. Eliot this week - seeking solace from the grim stories of war and racism. *Little Gidding* is the finale to one Eliot's greatest poetic works, *Four Quartets*. It was the last that he published in his lifetime. *Little Gidding* is the name of a place that Eliot visited only once but it apparently became a spiritual dwelling place. It is described on its website thusly;

"Little Gidding church is difficult to find, but unforgettable when found. It is a secluded place in remote Huntingdonshire countryside which has borne witness to turbulent times over a thousand years with serenity, simplicity and peace."

Little Gidding was a Christian community that grew out of the family of Nicholas Ferrar, in the early 17th century. Prior to that, it had belonged to the Knights Templar. Ferrar created a community that was dedicated to faith and organized around daily devotions. In true Anglican fashion, they strove for balance between scripture and tradition, liturgy and preaching, family and community. In Eliot's poem, this is a place out of time, "Here, the intersection of the timeless moment is England and nowhere. Never and always." This poem for today is the last section of *Little Gidding*;

We shall not cease from exploration

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time.

Through the unknown, remembered gate

When the last of earth left to discover

Is that which was the beginning;

At the source of the longest river

The voice of the hidden waterfall

And the children in the apple-tree

Not known, because not looked for

But heard, half-heard, in the stillness

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

Between two waves of the sea.

Quick now, here, now, always.

A condition of complete simplicity

(Costing not less than everything)

And all shall be well and

All manner of thing shall be well

When the tongues of flame are in-folded

Into the crowned knot of fire

And the fire and the rose are one.

Eliot writes so beautifully of the themes of eternity and unity, so often out of sight in our lives. But he found a peace in Little Gidding that became his thin place and entry to these mysteries. The Irish believe that there are places in which the veil between the seen and the unseen worlds is very thin. In a thin place, one perceives both worlds existing in the same place and time. A thin place is a place of eternity, in which the presence of the divine is strongly known.

Eliot wrote *Little Gidding* during the horrors of war in 1942. London was being bombed, Eliot's health was failing and yet he saw through the destruction and the despair to a reality that exists just beyond our sight. He saw that humanity's salvation lay in knowing that love, our beginning and our end, is available if we remember to look for it. Our innocence, as children in the apple-tree, is not gone, just forgotten. We assume that innocence is something to be outgrown, something that we get over as we become competitive and suspicious. We hear that we must become like a child to really get what Jesus was talking about, but we smile and wink at that. Life is serious and it's better to be wary - we'll leave that other stuff to Jesus and the kids while we get on about the real world. But the real world as we have seen it this week is not where we are meant to be.

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But if we stop and listen to the sound between the waves, the simplicity of who we truly are is available to us. But it will cost us nothing less than everything. It will cost us our warring ways, our fear and suspicion of those who are different, our misplaced understanding of what we truly need. But as Eliot assures us, when we pay that price, when what comes out of our hearts is only love, then all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time.

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