



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

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

To Welcome the Ones who Frighten Us

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

May 10, 2015

Things got a little exciting around here last week. For any of you who may not have heard, last Sunday's 10:00 service was disrupted by a woman who decided to join the Gospel procession and also became quite vocal during the Eucharistic prayer before making a loud exit. It was no surprise to learn that she suffers from a fairly serious mental illness. Since that time, I have spoken with the Branford Police Department and learned that they had a long conversation with her quite soon after her departure. I have also spoken to several mental health providers in town. Our own John Seibyl has offered his knowledge and experience with such patients to help us better understand and have a strategy in place should such a thing happen again. Branford has a concentration of mental health services and so it is not a surprise that there is quite a number of people who live in our town who are clients. We do not often experience it in such dramatic fashion. I'm told that this is not an uncommon thing in big city churches.

What happened last week was frightening for many of us. Our young people now have regular lock-down drills in their schools because of Sandy Hook and the all too many similar events involving people with mental illness. Of course that was on their minds. The fact that this woman was carrying a large bag added to the anxiety. The imagination goes naturally to what she might have been carrying and what was she planning. I am proud of all of us here and convinced that our non-reaction was the best possible response. I will tell you that we will be vigilant in the future and the Branford Police expect us to call them immediately if she returns. It would not be my plan to have her automatically removed, but to have them on hand and aware. They are all trained to be a calming presence in such situations to keep things from escalating. We would all be well served to know something about that ourselves. We'll talk.

Our Gospel reading this morning is the new commandment from Jesus to his disciples - "love one another as I have loved you." Jesus takes the summary of the law, the "love God and your neighbor as yourself" and gives it the added description of his own example. We are to love others with the same self-giving love that he showed for his disciples and for all of us. This warm, simple sounding instruction takes on a darker reality as we recall what his love led to. Loving in such a way involves risk. But we have to remember that he died as much for the Romans as he did for Israel and his friends. He made no distinctions. He went to the cross for all of the ones that the world rejects. So last Sunday we came face to face with one that we are to love in spite of our anxiety and fear.

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Last week, the 1st Letter of John reminded us that love is the strategy that we are to use in the world. "Perfect love casts our fear." What then does it look like to love someone who frightens us. First off, we all need to look at and be aware of how fear works in our lives. Fear is a \$multi-billion industry. It sells air time and advertising space, home security systems, baby monitors, anti-bacterial soap and of course, a whole lot of guns, not to mention war. There are whole marketing departments dedicated to keeping us scared out of our wits. "Love one another" seems like a pretty puny strategy in the face of such dire sensationalism.

Our fears are triggered by many things. We hear a story of a kidnapping and we proceed to wrap our children in cotton wool and virtually stalk them. Our grandson was spied upon every minute of the first three years of his life. When I was growing up, we would leave the house after breakfast and fan out across the neighborhood on our bikes. We had a bell by the back door that my mother would ring when a meal was about to go on the table. We climbed trees and occasionally broke bones. But we were allowed to go back out without a nervous parent following us around reminding us to be careful. We didn't always lock our doors. Despite the sensational stories on the news, the world has not become more dangerous and yet we are scared of everything we see. Somehow, our brainstems have taken over our capacity to think. We go to fear first rather than curiosity and compassion. Perhaps that's what the Bible alludes to when we are told "Fear not." We are that part of creation that can decide to use our higher functions but lately, we turn our responses over to the most primitive part of our brains. We appear to think that all of Jesus' statements about not being afraid must be referring to something other than the things that scare us. Jesus knew that to be afraid of something is to give it your power. We're better than that. We can choose love over fear.

Our country does have a mental health crisis, one that has been manufactured by a collision of circumstances. I was reminded of several things this week. First is that people have the right to not take their medication. It's true. Secondly, there are not adequate facilities to hospitalize someone long enough to make a difference, to put the pieces back together when they fall apart. Up to 40-50 years ago, the mentally ill were treated shamefully, locked away, often in dreadful circumstances. That has changed, there are no more state hospitals for the mentally ill. In many ways, that can be seen as progress. Unfortunately there has not been enough investment in the services and treatment needed now by those living in society. When state budgets are tight, mental health services are automatically on the chopping block. And so, many people living with mental illness do it on the streets and make regular trips to the ER and nothing gets any better. And we are afraid.

One thing that made me glad last Sunday was that, along with the fear, there was an overwhelming sense of compassion for our visitor. Being a part of deconstructing the stigma attached to mental illness is a worthy ministry, it respects the dignity of human beings. It also creates a safe place for us to admit when we are depressed or having panic attacks. It's a ministry that requires us do some work, to learn and be prepared for such encounters. We can

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actually learn how to love our neighbors who struggle with mental illness. Of course I'm not advocating that we be cavalier about genuine risk but that we are willing to be with or own fears and discomfort in the presence of people who are not doing so well.

I wish I knew what was going on in her head and why she came here last Sunday. Because her presence means we have to ask, "What is God asking us to do here?" Someone asked me what went through my mind. I said that it seemed to me like the story of when Jesus was confronted by someone controlled by a demon and the demon wanted Jesus to go away. The power of love in Jesus was big enough to heal the possessed mind and was therefore a threat to the demon. He indeed rid the tormented person of their illness. He cast out the demon. Would that mental health treatments were that instantaneous and effective. They're not but it did seem as though the power of what we were doing, proclaiming that as he is shown to us in the bread and shown to the world in us as the Body of Christ, that power was real in this place. It is the power that challenges all manner of brokenness, darkness, and fear. Jesus showed us that we have to be willing to risk to love. We can probably count on the world giving us the opportunities to do just that. So, Beloveds, let us learn to love one another, as he loved us.

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