



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

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

God's Hammer, Chipping Away

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

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When he received the commission for the sculpture, Michelangelo proceeded with the materials at hand - a five meter slab of marble that two other sculptors had already tried to use. Both had given up on the stone, not able to work with it. Michelangelo, who had already exhibited his brilliance in the recently completed Pieta, was up to the challenge of the marble. His approach was that, "Every block of stone has a statue inside it and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it." So with his vision, chisel and hammer, he began to uncover the figure of David that already existed in the marble. Apparently the other sculptors who had confronted the giant hunk of stone could not see what was in there. For five centuries, people have been enchanted and awed by what Michelangelo revealed. The statue of David is one of the wonders of the art world. The young shepherd boy and future king is not depicted standing triumphantly over the severed head of Goliath, but here he is shown before the battle, armed with a slingshot casually thrown over his shoulder. He is prepared to win with his wits, and we are shown the skilled military leader that he will become. We see David as his potential, as God sees him, confident and perfect.

The prophet Jeremiah gives us a dire image of the word of God as a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces. His frustration at the false prophets, who were spouting happy platitudes while the country was in great peril, make up a great part of his book. He saw the hammer of God - which is truth - as a threat to those who chose to bury their heads in the sand. Jeremiah foretold the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. His warnings were met with beatings, plots, imprisonment, he was thrown down a well, and generally abused. For those who did not heed his warnings, the destruction of the Temple and the city came like the shattering of all they knew. The truth was not easy to accept.

From the earliest days of the Israelite people, the ones chosen by God to be sculpted into a nation of priests, their relationship with Yahweh was not easy. We know the stories of slavery and liberation, wandering, warfare, faithfulness and idolatry, captivity and return. All of these are the work of God's chisel and hammer, chipping away at human culture and human nature, to reveal the unified human family that lies hidden within. It is rarely easy or pain-free. It rarely happens peacefully. The Israelite's tribal mentality was chipped away so that they could know themselves as one people. They needed to let go of pride so they could rebuild themselves after the humiliation of defeat.

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Today we hear Jesus, the baby in the manger grown up, the gentle shepherd, the prince of peace, warning that following him will not be easy or peaceful. It is a walk through deep dark valleys and days of trial in which your very family may turn their backs on you or just turn on you. Following Jesus is the process of chipping away at the outer human experience to reveal the spiritual being within. Michelangelo also said, "I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free." Jesus tells us, "I am in you." The challenge is to find it, to reveal it.

Most of us still struggle with that challenge, just as the Jewish people have. In particular, they have faced the issue of exclusivity. Who was a true Jew? Who could belong? I believe that that is one of the things that Jesus challenged. The Christ, the eternal Word, is for all, he is more a Cosmic figure than one belonging to any one people. Exclusivity is one of the most difficult human habits to shatter. We see it today in our nation as a people of great diversity, ethnically and religiously. As long as we see others as "not belonging", we cannot see them as brothers and sisters in Christ, all one and the same. The spiritual being that resides within our human marble does not see difference. The being created in the image of God dwells in unity. But it pains us greatly to have that cut free.

Human understanding of so many things, becomes rigid stone that will not slough off on its own. Look at what happened when astronomers like Galileo shared the truth that they saw in the heavens. We are not the center of the universe. The response to such news was swift and harsh. It took until this century for Galileo to be pardoned for his crime of telling the truth. We are wrapped in a solid rock of fear whenever our understanding of reality is challenged. Look at Darwin and the brouhaha that continues to this day about how different species emerged and evolved. The argument is couched as either/or. You can be a creationist or you can believe in science. Someone please take a hammer to that rigidity and let us be a people who understand the distinctions and who can embrace the complexity of a both/and view.

We all have things that God is chipping away at so we can know ourselves as fully connected to all that is. What we know about the nature of reality is much less sure than we would like. We do not live in a mechanistic universe, made up of discrete parts. Instead, we are all part of a fluid, relational, quirky energy field. We are not what we have always thought. It is easier to be disconnected and be able to shut your eyes and put your fingers in your ears. Because when you are connected to everything, it matters what happens to the polar ice caps and the bears that live there. It matters what happens to people who cannot afford the necessities of life or are denied basic rights. It matters that Middle Eastern nations are erupting in murderous violence. It matters because when it happens, in some mysterious, unseen way, it is happening to you and everyone. It is happening to the whole world at once.

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We need only look at Jesus to get a glimpse of the being that is hidden within our human marble facade. Jesus understood fear as a corrosive emotion. He told his followers not be afraid and he himself refused to give into fear. God works continually to shatter the fear that immobilizes us. When fear is chipped away, hope is revealed. Jesus may have been annoyed at people from time to time, but he did not dwell in anger. Anger keeps us from our spiritual natures. It mires us in the worst human impulses. When it is cut away, peace emerges and speaks more powerfully than anger ever could. Joy and contentment are waiting in you when worry and anxiety are removed. The Christ within you, your true self is the spirit of love, self-giving, generous love, compassion, forgiveness, joy and peace. You do not have to wait for God's hammer or a Michelangelo to free you. You can choose in every moment to shed the marble skin and let your Christ light shine for all to see. When you take courageous steps to see beyond division, fear, and limitation you will be surprised at how many are there to join you, how good you will feel, and how much will change because more love has been let loose in the world.

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