



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

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

The Christ Light Switch

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

April 6, 2014

Our time in the season of Lent is nearly done. Next week we turn from our own journey to walk with Jesus through the hard days of Holy Week. Ideally, Lent has prepared us for this, particularly by the stories of those we have encountered along the way. Their stories of transformation are meant to be our stories. We have met Nicodemus, who learned what it means to die to old ideas and eventually be born anew—into awareness of a different relationship with God. We met the woman who brought a water jar and all of her baggage to the well and was transformed from outcast to beloved, her thirst quenched by the living water of Jesus' love. And then we met the man born blind, who was given his sight, so that he could see the wonder of all creation and a vision of what God's kingdom might become. All of them were transformed from diminished expressions of who they were meant to be, into new states of spiritual awareness and understanding.

It is fitting that on this last Sunday of Lent, we hear the story of Lazarus – Lazarus friend of Jesus, raised from the dead and given the gift of life begun anew. Interestingly, the stories of most characters in the Bible are told in such a way that we get very little background information about them, and Lazarus is no exception. He appears only in the Gospel of John, and his significance seems to be limited to being raised from the dead. We know that he is the brother of Mary and Martha and that Jesus loved him, so they obviously they all have some history together. We also learn in the next chapter that a plot to kill Lazarus develops because he is living proof of Jesus' power. That's it. Don't you wish that there was a little bit more, at least some feedback about what he experienced? Surely, he must have had some awareness of having come back from "some place", like the many descriptions provided from those who have near death experiences? Surely, he must have emerged a "new man", with a totally different perspective on life.

Well, unfortunately, we are not given any of these insights, so let's consider for a moment how Lazarus might have approached the rest of his life? He had his own experience of trial and isolation. He was sick before he died, and that brings its own kind of solitude and testing. And then there was the emptying that takes place in the process of dying, perhaps even made more poignant when his friend Jesus did not arrive in time. We do not know what happened to him between death and Jesus' call to "come out!" But surely he was different. No doubt he never again took for granted the bright morning sun, or the taste of his favorite food, or the sweet smell of the spring air. He probably found the company of his friends greater

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comforting. But my guess is that something changed inside him too. For one thing, I bet he became fearless.

It's probably hard to scare someone who has experienced with such intimacy the power of Christ's love, which is what raised Lazarus to new life. The love that flowed through Jesus is what called Lazarus back, it is that love that keeps calling us back into relationship with God.

Ultimately, love is the message of the Lent. Love is the invitation to the solitude and trial, the inspiration to let go of all that holds us back. Love is as persistent as the tide, flowing in and out, wearing down our rough edges. The transformation that has been calling us during Lent doesn't happen all at once. It isn't an aha moment, but one of growth and incremental progress. The journey through the weeks of Lent slowly brings us through to where we begin to understand, to see, and to live.

For those of us who have been taking part in the Lent Madness process and coming together on Wednesday nights, this Lent has been a banquet of personalities and it's been interesting to hear how we have responded to their stories and made the choices we did in our voting. As these brackets, modeled on the March NCAA basketball tournament, have progressed, we have been asking ourselves, what is important. What makes someone's story more compelling, more inspiring than someone else's. What this has done for me is to lift up what it looks like when someone is touched by Christ's power. They are taken in directions unanticipated.

Tiny Harriet Bedell, born in 1875, grew up in Buffalo, New York. At age 29, her encounter with Christ came in the form of a visiting missionary from the Far East. She heard a call to come out of her safe life as a teacher and good daughter to her widowed mother. She was ordained a deacon and began to serve Native American communities in Oklahoma, Alaska and eventually the Everglades. Her Christ light made her fearless and undeterrable. She got herself around the Florida swamps poling a dugout canoe and around taught herself to drive a Model A sedan, but never above the speed limit. She did whatever it took to help the Seminole people; teaching them, providing health care, creating markets for their craft work. Her badgering the CEO of the Collier Corporation, a citrus company became legendary. She would announce herself to his secretary and then run down around to the back stairs to meet him as he tried to sneak out. He later said, "When the Deaconess got after you for something. I found it was best to acquiesce and comply with her request because she would keep after you until you got it done for her."

Harriet hit mandatory retirement at age 68 but proclaimed, "There is no retirement in the service of the Master." She kept on going and was instrumental in the campaign for the Seminole people to be recognized as an official tribe and granted 200,000 acres in the Everglades where they would have their own school. It took a hurricane in 1960 when she was 86 to finally send her to a retirement home, where she promptly organized everything.

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Did Harriett Bedell know that she was capable of all of this? It was within her but the inner light switch needed to be flipped on. That is how Jesus works in our lives. That's how Jesus changed the Samaritan woman. She was never what others said about her and circumstances of her life. It took Jesus asking her for a drink of water to uncover her inner dignity and worth. He spent so much of his ministry helping people see. Physical blindness was merely his metaphor for what ails us. We have the knowledge within us that we are spiritual beings but we are distracted by the human stuff and think that it all there is. And to clarify, he showed people that even death is not what we think it is.

He calls us all out of prisons of our own making, darkness imposed by history and tradition, and out of fear that keeps us so cautious. Jesus invites us to glimpse a larger reality, to wade into these waters of life, one step at a time. He doesn't shove us in and leave us floundering but instead jumps in first and says "come on, I'll catch you." That's what we are supposed to have learned during this Lent. We are given the courage to then walk with him on his journey to Easter morning.

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