



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

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

Sermons from the Desert - Lent 5

The Rev. Sharon K. Gracen and Bill Bray

Sharon - Did you ever love someone so much that it made you afraid? Or possibly it made you voluntarily blind? Jesus' apostles were blind to the trajectory of his path. How often did they respond to his warnings about what would happen to him with - "Don't say such a thing!" They couldn't allow such thoughts to pierce the bliss of being part of his mission, of being in his company. During Jesus' lifetime, Roman poet Lucan identified the scary part of love, "I have a wife, I have sons, all of them hostages given to fate." Bill Bray, a faithful, quiet presence in worship here at Trinity, has agreed to tell his story of such fate. It is the desert that people fear the most - the suffering of those they love.

Bill - It's easy to believe the myth of invulnerability - all teenagers have it. I wonder if my wife Betsey and I had it. We were such a normal family - two kids, 3 bedroom house, lawn to mow, meals to eat together. Heather was the elder of the two kids. Five years later, along came Stephen. She was the terrific big sister, dressing him up in all sorts of outfits before he was old enough to object. And then he became the bratty, "such a pain" little brother. "Do I have to take him with me?"

Heather was a really normal kid. As long as you consider singing "You light up my life" karaoke style while dressed in Wonder Woman Underoos normal She was athletic but not Olympic caliber athletic. She was good academically but not "gotta get into Harvard" academic. Hers was just natural ability that didn't get pushed to the max. She swam in high school and thrived in a team atmosphere. She always had a better time in a relay than in an individual race. Doing well for her teammates was more important than a medal for herself.

We always talked around the dinner table. Stephen was the comedian; Heather was the thoughtful one. She seemed to have been born worldly. She was aware of things going on in faraway places and seriously considered what was right or fair. Betsey and I respected our kids and supported them in what they wanted to do. Mostly we wanted them to know that they were loved. We were a normal family. We never dreamed that fate would take a hostage.

The kids grew up here at Trinity. It made a big difference in Heather's life when she became one of the first women chalice bearers as a teenager. It was like watching a butterfly wiggle out of its cocoon and spread her beautiful wings. I remember once someone talking about the Book of Revelation and all of the end of the world language in it. Heather said, "I don't want to hear about that stuff. Why should I bother to figure out what I want to be if it's all going to end?" She was good at asking questions and we always tried to give her straight answers.

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Sharon - Jesus interpreted Mary's anointing with the costly oil as preparing for his death. I wonder if that's what Mary thought. I think she was honoring Jesus as the spiritual leader and teacher that they had come to love. He was in Jerusalem for a celebration, he was powerful enough to have raised Lazarus from the dead. How could he be a hostage of fate?

Bill - In the summer of 1996, when Heather was 20 years old, the summer before her senior year of college, she coughed a lot, a dry cough that just never went away. I'll never forget December 19th, Heather was home for Christmas and Betsey called me to tell me that I needed to get over to the doctor's office right away. There was an X-ray and the doctor was worried. On that drive, I realized that we were no longer a normal family. The MRI showed 80% of her lung was filled up with a tumor. It was Hodgkin's Lymphoma. The doctor told us that there were 2 kinds of Lymphoma and at least this was the one with the most hope. On Christmas Eve, Heather had her first chemo. In the next year, I would learn the depth of my daughter's strength. I would also learn a pain like I never imagined. We all worry when our children are little that something might happen to them. We listen for their breathing when they sleep in their cribs; when they take off on their bikes by themselves we watch them all the way down the block. When they get their driver's license we wait up until they're home. All of the things I had imagined were nothing compared to having to watch her suffer. I'd always told the kids, "if I could switch places with you and take the hurt, I would." There is no kind of helpless like sitting with your daughter as she gets burning chemicals pumped into her body and hoping that it will save her because you can't.

Heather refused to let the cancer or the chemo get her down. She would come home for a Friday treatment and be back in school on Monday. One time she went to a Husky game down to NC. When her oncologist objected to not having been told about such plans, she said, "Need to know, doc!" One amazing thing was that she really never looked sick until the very end of her treatments. There were lots of ups and down. The cancer came back after the first round of treatments. We didn't talk much about what was going on, just kept putting one foot in front of the other and stayed with her as she fought the disease. She was one of the earliest people to have their own stem cells harvested, multiplied and then put back. I guess you could say that she healed herself.

Sharon - "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, then were we like those who dream. Those who sowed with tears, will reap with songs of joy."

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Bill - As I struggled to find some answers to the obvious questions at such a time, I was given a huge boost. During Heather's first round of chemo, Trinity was offering the Alpha course - kind of a Christianity 101 that helped us take Jesus from our heads to our hearts. A wonderful group of people came together to study and pray and I think that that was when I really met Christ. The group surrounded me and prayed for me and I felt a wave of warmth cover and fill me like nothing I had ever experienced before. It changed me. On our last class we went out to the Mercy Center and Cynthia Knapp, the associate rector, was struggling with some chords on the guitar to accompany some of our songs. I suggested that instead of the D minor 7, which she didn't know, that she should just play an F chord. She looked at me and said, "You play?" I hadn't touched a guitar in 25 years. Mine was covered with dust in the back of a closet. Cynthia pushed her guitar into my hands and a whole new part of my spiritual journey began. I began to play and then songs started to come to me. The first one I wrote was for Heather. I'll play it for you during communion. I wrote others for people I loved and then I realized that I was writing songs just because it felt so good to love God.

I didn't feel like I had answers, in fact, I had even more questions. What was the connection between my spiritual awakening and my daughter's illness? How could I understand what God was doing in all of this?

Heather survived, actually she did more than that. She finished college and got her Masters. She knew her own mind. She had had enough of baseball with Stephen in the family so she always said would never marry a baseball player, or a Yalie, or someone from the Valley or, having grown up surrounded by long Polish names, ever marry one of those. Then she met Keith Pelatowski, a Yalie, from Naugatuck who spent three years in the minor leagues. The doctors had told Heather that all of the chemo had probably ruined her chances of ever having a child. Well, Mandy, Ryan, Aiden and Kellen are regular reminders of God's grace and goodness.

In some ways, we've gone back to being a normal family, although I still can't think about what Heather went through without tears in my eyes.. But trust me, we never take anything for granted and never cease to sing praise to God, songs of joy and immense gratitude.

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