



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

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

Lenten Dialogues from the Desert #1

The Rev. Sharon K. Gracen and Ann Collier

February 14, 2016

We know what Jesus time in the desert looked like. But there are lots of deserts. This Lent we are blessed to have some lovely brave people willing to share what their journey through the desert was like. This morning, I introduce to you Ann Collier. I first met Ann on the phone as I called through the directory before I got here in 2010. I remember her telling me that she was studying for her Reiki certification and tap dancing. I thought, this is going to be a fun place. My predecessor Hank Burdick once quipped that Ann done everything here except preach. Well, this morning, we fix that.

Ann - I met my husband John when I was supposed to be on a blind date with someone else. He was a handsome, blond haired, blue-eyed, Marine. He was very romantic but you'd never know if from the non-proposal I received. One day he just asked me if I wanted to go furniture shopping. I guess the whole thing was already settled in his mind, he had just forgotten to mention it to me. Anyway, we were married in 1955 and had three kids and a very good life. He built our house himself with the help of friends like Dom Longo. He took wonderful care of me when I developed rheumatoid and osteoarthritis and lymphoma. I could barely walk but he convinced me that doing my hair and putting on my makeup would make me feel better. He wasn't wrong.

Sharon - I'm sure that Jesus did not expect his baptism to be followed by a time of trial and testing in the desert. The desert is a lonely and dangerous place. All kinds of thoughts and fears will rise to the surface. You learn a lot about yourself there.

Ann: When John was 59 he developed Parkinson's which he hid successfully for a while. He tried to convince me that his hand tremors were from his funny bone. They weren't and it wasn't funny. The dementia followed some years later. While he was trying to keep anyone from noticing, he worked harder than ever, so afraid of making a mistake. He would stay late checking and rechecking his work. And then the day came that he couldn't hide it any more. I had asked him to make a couple of phone calls that I hadn't gotten around to before heading out for some errands. When I came home there were phone books spread out all over the table. He told me that he hadn't made the calls because he didn't know how to use the phone. That one little sentence was the end of our life as we had known it. Everything seemed strange, like I didn't recognize my life. And then there were so many moments like that. He went out to move the car one day. He found it just fine but didn't know how to open the door. I don't remember if I was more sad or scared.

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Sharon: Emotions in the desert are intense. There's no comforting place to curl up and feel safe. We might know that we are angry but not really at who or what. Or sometimes even why.

Ann: I was angry, at John. We had always planned to travel when he retired. He'd bought a book about Ireland. A beautiful picture book about the place of our dreams. But by then I knew, and his doctor knew as well, that we couldn't travel. It was one thing for him to wander away at home or somewhere here in Branford. He was really good at that. You never heard him leave. He'd just be gone. I knew that we'd never travel again. It was too dangerous for him and too hard on me. Instead we did everything together because I had to keep him with me. He had always been on the Buildings and Grounds team here at Trinity. I'd bring him over and sit right here while he was downstairs tinkering with the furnace. Those were little moments of calm for me. The day he told Rev. Libby that he had to resign from Buildings and Grounds was the first time he cried. Then the depression really set in. Between his confusion, anger and occasional meanness, he was less and less the man that I had married.

But there were beautiful moments as well. John was part of a regular card game with a group of men from Trinity. They were all really close and even when John couldn't play any longer, because he didn't understand the cards or what to do with them, they would come and pick him up and bring him to the game. He'd usually sit in the kitchen but he was never left out. Two lovely memories of being in this church were when John was awarded the CT Medal for Service from the Marine Corp. Jack Doherty pinned the medal on him and John had tears in his eyes but by that time, he had no words. And one Sunday morning, we renewed our wedding vows here, something that he had wanted to do but he couldn't say "I do."

Sharon: The tempter wanted Jesus to make a bargain. He was actually asking "will you sell your soul for comfort or power?" Jesus didn't do it. But the desert is that place in which we question of our own fidelity. Can we remain true to our values and faith and self when the rug has been pulled out from under us?

Ann: I know that John was scared, afraid that I would abandon him, even when we wasn't sure who I was, he knew that I was there. He begged that I would keep him at home and eventually I promised that I would. I don't like to break promises, especially to family, but the time came when I couldn't keep him safe and myself sane. John lived his last eight years at Watrous Nursing Home. It was a new chapter for us. I spent every day there with him. He would be waiting for me at the door and was unhappy if I was out of his sight. He became very possessive. I spent my time reading to people, doing puzzles, creating craft programs. I think it kept from losing my mind. I was around so much, one woman was sure that I was hitting on her husband! But keeping myself busy doing things for the people there was how I held it together.

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I have always lived with the philosophy that whatever comes along, you just deal with it. So I didn't really talk about what life was like to anybody. I couldn't come to church because John needed me with him. It was a very lonely time. But there were funny moments, too. I'd taken him out to lunch and we were on our way back in the car when he looked over at me and said, "I could get used to living with you." I said, "That's good, cause we're married." I think he believed me.

Sharon: The Israelites wandered in the desert for 40 years. Jesus prayed and fasted there for 40 days. For them there was a point at which they reached the edge of the desert, the beginning of the end of their ordeal.

Ann - I remember the last time John spoke to me. We were in the dining room; I helping him eat and filling the time with chatter about this, that, and everything. Suddenly he looked at me and said, "Don't you have an off switch?" I think I laughed but I realized that I was spending so much time with a man who didn't know who I was that I was in danger of forgetting who I was, too. My life had completely disappeared. So I began to take some days off, which I needed badly but the guilt that I felt was almost worse. Taking care of myself felt so selfish. But I did it and started reweaving the strands of my life back together.

And then in 2009, after so many years of fear and suffering, John died. I remember that the only thing I felt was freedom. I had lost my husband years before. I'd already spent those years crying and grieving that suddenly there was only exhilaration. It was a long time before I would cry again. In the years since I have rebuilt my life. The long trek through the desert seems a bit faded as the good memories have been able to resurface. I'm surrounded by my children and grand-children, I'm back here and I laugh a lot. And no, John, I don't have an off switch!

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