



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

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

Lenten Dialogues from the Desert #3

The Rev. Sharon K. Gracen and Judie Cavanaugh

February 28, 2016

Sharon - While the desert can be a lonely and isolating place, there are some deserts that we share with other people. September 11, 2001 created a desert experience for our nation and others. And then there was December 14, 2012. Sandy Hook became a synonym for the desert. Judie Cavanaugh grew up there. She went to Sandy Hook Elementary. It was a place filled with such normalcy and innocence as to be a kind of holy ground. We know Judie as a member of our Vestry, a mentor to teens in Confirm not Conform, someone who can laugh louder than everyone else. It's good to remember that whatever we see is never all there is in someone's story.

Judie - The Cavanaugh Family, my big Irish family, has been in the Sandy Hook neighborhood of Newtown for a long time; we still have 3 homes there. Two of my uncles served as Fire Chief. I had my wedding at the firehouse. I was always disappointed that I couldn't make my entrance sliding **down** the pole. The only reason I didn't was because they don't have one. Of the 180 people at the wedding, 140 were my relatives. And then one day, the firehouse, which is right near the school, was filled with terrified children and desperate parents.

I heard about it from some of my students, hours afterwards. I teach art in New Haven and although I don't have biological children, in any given year, I claim 450 as my own. But in that moment, I couldn't be with them, I had to leave my classroom to try to absorb what I had heard. As I learned the details, a tape began running in my head and it would run for a long time on a repeating loop. I knew the route that the shooter took. Through the front door, past the office, into classrooms. It was the same route I had taken so many times into days of friends and learning, into a place of unquestioned safety. But no more. Now it was violated and stained. My mom was the Lunch Lady at that school for a long time and I couldn't stop my mind from wondering what would have happened if she had still been there.

Teaching has changed since people began shooting children in schools. The possibility of violence is an ever present reality and we have to have a plan. We have figured out that all of my 8th graders will fit in the storage closet together. I didn't leave them in there too long together, they are after all 8th graders. It was bizarre to practice such a thing and then one of the kids said to me "don't worry Miss Cav - we'll take care of you." I have a plan for the little ones, too. All of my plans involve being ready to die to protect them and I would, even the ones who make me crazy.

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Sharon - The name of God, given to Moses from the mysterious burning bush is I Am that I Am, a name beyond all names - it encompasses all that is, all time and all space. Moses encountered it in the midst of holy ground but such a name transcends our understanding of the holy. The holy is and must be found in all places, even places touched by evil.

Judie - I am so lucky to work with children, especially with art. My own art has given me a way to get the hurt out - it's been like a steam valve. At first my art was angry, lots of stabbing at the paper but gradually it became softer, filled with circles. I guess they were an expression of hope that things could be whole again, that we could reconnect the broken pieces. My students doing their art have been amazing. I created a lesson for them called "My Hands are My Heart" to help them connect to ways that we connect to each other with love. When I told them about it, they asked right away, "Is this because of Sandy Hook?" I said, "yes, it is." They said they were glad and then threw themselves into it painting hands and writing their ideas on them. "My hands are my heart when...when I make music, when somebody drops something and I pick it up, when I play with someone who has no one to play with." Their beautiful spirits were the first part of my slow crawl out of the desert.

On the one year anniversary I took a personal day and I came here and we rang the bells. The sound of that bell echoing out into the town took tiny pieces of grief with it. Later I lit candles, something I now do every year. I light 28 of them because Adam and his mother were also part of the tragedy. I have been able to forgive him because I know how broken he was and how it went unnoticed, at least in any way that would have made a difference. He was failed by a whole lot of people and institutions. Holding onto anger at him wouldn't have helped anything. It would have just trapped me in the hallways of my old school, unable to ever go anywhere else.

Sharon - In the days and weeks after the horror, a common question was "where is God" or "what kind of a god allows this sort of thing?" Reporters called churches asking how we were going to respond to the shootings. We clergy stumbled around for wisdom and something quotable. There was lots of talk about guns and a poor mental health system, and "why" questions, a search for meaning in the presence of the incomprehensible. We all wanted answers right away. We were not able to zoom out to the perspective of the I Am that I Am, something that is all encompassing that perceives our moments, however important they are to us, as a part of the eternal unfolding. We needed something more specific than that. This desert was too hard to go it alone. All we could do was to hold on to each other and know that we were all held by something bigger.

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Judie - and that's what I did. I went home more often, even though it was really hard. There is a shadow over Newtown that goes all the way to the ground and you can still feel it when you arrive. I developed my own little ritual in the way I drove through on my way to my family. I call it the grand tour, into the center of town, around the flag pole, down the hill into Sandy Hook. At first I couldn't go without crying, that took until last summer. The tape in my head consumed my ability to remember anything else. And then, a friend here, a Trinity friend, said something simple, reminding me that I have so many wonderful memories of Sandy Hook. And I realized that they would be my way out and that I did have some power. I had the power to choose forgiveness over anger. I could choose what thoughts I allowed to run around in my head. I could choose to create beauty and joy and laughter.

My sister and I had been having a rough patch in our relationship. We might come from a big extended family but our parents are gone and we're all we've got. As I emerged from my cocoon of grief, I knew that I could not give up on her and us any more than I was prepared to give up on the good memories of my town. I'm proud to say that we have worked through what was dividing us and are in a good place now. I think it has all been a part of a greater healing.

Everyone I know has had their own way of coping. Lots of my cousins are teachers. One of them quit because she couldn't go into a school again. I've lost friends and some family because I don't believe that all teachers should have loaded guns in their desks. Instead I paint and enjoy things like the Healing Art Center in Newtown. Two times I ran the Sandy Hook Promise 5K and trust me I am not a runner. The last time I got shin splints trying to outrun the 72 year old mayor of Newtown. She's fast! The good thing was that we were all running toward something and we were doing it together, together on ground made holy once again.

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