



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

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

Conversation Partners For Lent

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

February 17, 2013

This year, Lent feels disturbingly important. Along with how we might wish to pursue spiritual growth or whatever we might want to improve individually, I don't think that we have the luxury of ignoring the broken parts of humanity on a larger scale anymore. Just two months ago we were all clinging to each other in shock at the death of so many little ones so nearby. We clever humans have developed such capacity for destruction that we dare no longer deflect reality believing that it's just the way things are, that it has nothing to do with us or that it might not visit us.

Jimmy Greene's daughter Ana Marquez-Greene died huddled in the washroom of her 1st grade class room. Her father, like all of the parents, struggles to keep putting one foot in front of the other. On the Facebook page that remembers Ana, he admitted that it is getting harder not easier as the days go by and that is for his son that he tries to keep going. He wrote, "On more than one occasion the darkness has enveloped my spirit" and then he invokes the words that Jesus gasped while hanging on the cross, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

Jimmy Greene has been in Washington and he has this to say "I don't know much of anything, but I do know this, if we don't find a way to bury at least some of our differences, we as a nation will continue to bury our children."

He also went to the firehouse to deliver valentines to the first responders. It was hard. The firefighters and EMTs were undone by his pain and he by theirs. He said, "*I saw in their eyes how their hearts were broken for me. And my heart broke for them. Perhaps that is what we need, to be more broken for our neighbors, for our loved ones, our co-workers, even the people who hurt us and bring us strife.*"

Unity. So that love can win.

Respect. So that love can win.

Empathy. So that love can win.

Conscious collaboration. So that love can win.

Peace. So that love can win."

And then he closed his post by quoting the Gospel of John, "*A new command I give you, love one other. As I have loved you, so must you love one another.*"

This Lent feels like the opportunity to do some work on why we can't seem to do that – to love each other in the way that Jesus loves us. It's work not just for ourselves but as our part of collective, unified human experience. Each of us is like an individual neuron in the brain. Neurons have the ability to transmit signals to other neurons, it's actually why they exist – to communicate. What is communicated matters. There are two kinds of signals, the ones that take care and focus only on the security of the self and the ones that foster the sense of belonging and unity with everything else. Both are necessary. One is self-oriented; the other is Jesus' way of self-giving love. The work that we are called to do is to send out more of the love signal and the one that is afraid.

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Jesus went into the desert to sort things out before he was ready to teach and lead people into love. It was a time of focused self-study and so it is no surprise that temptations sprung up all around him. Take care of yourself, own your power, think how great it will be if you succeed at this messiah stuff. We are told that Jesus had the right answers. It doesn't come as naturally to us. It certainly doesn't come naturally to me. That's why I have chosen a couple of conversation partners for my Lenten program of self-discovery. They are people from different times and circumstances; Teresa of Avila, a 16th century Carmelite nun and mystic. Viktor Frankl, a 20th century psychologist and survivor of the Nazi death camps. They both have wise insights for these dangerous times.

Teresa grew up the daughter of privilege in Avila, Spain. The idea of marriage seemed to her a kind of prison in which she would lose all autonomy. That does not mean that she was immune to romantic entanglements, there appear to have been several. To escape the prospect of marriage she ran away from home and entered the Carmelite convent. It was the fashion of the time for the convent parlor to be a lively home to socializing and gossip at which Teresa excelled. She was vivacious and very popular. At some point she realized that her attachment to such conversations was a stumbling block to her faith and prayer life and she withdrew. She was disenchanted with the lack of focus and discipline in the convent. She became a prayer warrior and reformer.

Teresa's mystical experiences, some during illnesses and more later, drew her into an intimate relationship with God – the Beloved. She taught this relationship to others through her work on inner prayer and in her zealous reform of the Carmelite Order. On several occasions, Teresa fell under the tyranny of the Inquisition, imprisoned for a year. But she successfully defended herself, her visions and her ideas in strategically written letters and books. A tireless builder, Teresa founded Carmelite houses all over Spain and taught her spiritual sons and daughters the discipline, dedication and methods of contemplative prayer. And she did it all with humor and a zest for life.

Teresa believed that we were all on a journey to perfection which is described in her best known work *The Interior Castle*. The book is the map of that journey culminating in union with God at the light-filled center of the castle. One need not be a cloistered Carmelite nun to embark on such a journey.

Viktor Frankl knew from age 3 that we wanted to be a doctor. At a still young age that blossomed into an interest in mental and emotional health. By 1939, while in his mid-30s, he was the director of the only Jewish hospital in Vienna. In 1942, he had the opportunity and a visa awaiting him to leave Austria and escape the impending fury of the Third Reich. But he chose not to go so that he could remain with his elderly parents. That September he, his pregnant wife and his parents were all arrested. He was the only one to survive. Frankl's greatest legacy is his book *Man's Search for Meaning* which described life in the midst of death-dealing inhumanity. He met the Nazi attempts to dehumanize their prisoners with a resolve to not succumb to suicide or to lose himself in despair. The central tenet of his book and his life is that circumstances can take away all that you possess except your freedom to choose how you respond. Viktor Frankl's survival was part a will to live, good instincts, and luck. He drew deeply on innate optimism, humor, detachment, concentrating on loving thoughts of his wife and a desire to finish his life's work. Once freed, he did not condemn those who had fled to safety or even those who had played a part in his arrest and his treatment in the camps. He said, "I do not forget any good deed done to me, and I do not carry a grudge for a bad one." He rejected the idea of collective guilt and was committed to the potential of anyone, even a Nazi criminal, to transcend evil by making responsible choices.

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In this season of Lent, let us commit ourselves to transformation not for ourselves alone, but for the good of the world. Heed Viktor Frankl's commitment to always choosing a response that does no harm to those around you or to your own soul. Trust Teresa of Avila that commitment to a journey toward the Beloved will bring unimagined grace and joy. In their own times, Teresa and Viktor also said "Do these things so that love can win."

Dear God, let love win.

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