



# TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*on the Branford Green*

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

## Emotional Preparedness

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

February 24, 2013

It's true that the eyes of the world are on Newtown. We are watching them in many ways. Some watch with wariness at what Newtown's pain might mean for something they think of as a way of life. Others watch with a desperate hope that this wounded town will lead us somewhere better. What this means for the people of Newtown is that they are choosing their words very carefully; they are striving mightily to make the right moves and show us something good about humanity.

As I sat in a full auditorium listening to comments and questions, the pressure to do this right was palpable. The good news is that they are. I left there feeling as good about humanity as I have in a long time. There was a panel of legislators from Hartford who seemed to be aware of the fact that people need them to be less politician and more public servant right now. The bipartisan task force that has been assembled to look at measures on gun control, school safety and mental health was specifically organized to have an equal number of Republicans and Democrats despite a legislature that does not. That alone makes for a good start. The Minority Leader of the Senate shared that he had never been a gun person and as a result was ignorant of a topic that is important to very large segment of the population. He chose to address that by going and learning about guns, going to the shooting range and getting helpful knowledge that will now inform his work on the task force. I cannot tell you how appreciated that was by a lot of the people who were there. It was just one of the moments of people reaching across a deep divide.

There was not an angry word spoken that night. There were certainly passions and fears expressed but it was done in a way that we can all admire. The world is watching and Newtown is showing up in a most commendable way. The Sandy Hook Promise is a group with a statement that includes this; *To truly honor the lives lost by turning our tragedy into a moment of transformation.* Without using Christian language, they are embracing the reality of the cross and holding firm to hope and the conviction that the cross is never the end of the story.

In the Gospel reading today, Jesus receives a warning that Herod wants to kill him. What Herod is mostly concerned about is the connection between Jesus and John the Baptist, whom he had already beheaded. He thought he was rid of John the troublemaker but here is another and people were beginning to pay a lot of attention to Jesus and all that he was doing. Herod wanted the problem gone. Jesus response was, "I'm going to continue to do what I do, to cure people and cast out demons, and then I'm heading to Jerusalem, the city that kills its prophets." Jesus said, despite threats and obstacles, he would follow the path that he knew was his and he would do as best he could.

Viktor Frankl, one of my Lenten conversation partners that I told you about last week, has a great deal to say about trying to do things right, even under the most trying of circumstances, Auschwitz and Dachau. He refers to being worthy of one's suffering. These are his words, "The way in which a man accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails, the way in which he takes up his cross, gives him ample opportunity – even under the most difficult circumstances – to add a deeper meaning to his life. It may remain brave, dignified and unselfish. Or in the bitter fight for self-preservation he may forget his human dignity and become no more than an animal. Here lies the chance for a man either to make use of or to

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forgo the opportunities of attaining the moral values that a difficult situation may afford him. And this decides whether he is worthy of his sufferings or not.”

The stories that Viktor tells are staggering, unselfishness in the midst of pain and starvation, commitment to keeping others from falling into despair, finding joy, or at least peace in small moments. In all of it, he was constantly aware of the challenge being presented to him, the challenge to do it the best way he could. It's as if he were his own observer, always asking “am I doing this as well as I can?” He is surprisingly generous in his appraisal and description of even the most brutal of his captors. He does not seem to hold it against them; he merely tried to keep out of their way. Viktor Frankl is an extraordinary witness to what a human being can achieve while suffering greatly. While he had given thought to the meaning of life during his training as a doctor and psychiatrist, and had considered the role of suffering in the building of one's character, he could never have imagined such a horrible laboratory in which to prove his thesis.

We have no idea what life is going to throw at us. No one wakes up in the morning expecting anything other than a normal day. We may practice disaster preparedness when bad weather is approaching, but we generally don't think in terms of being prepared for the hard experiences of life. But it is a rare life into which no rain falls. So it would seem that we would benefit from some consideration of our philosophy of, if not suffering at least hardship. I'm not suggesting dwelling on all manner of awful things that might happen but rather what your preferred response might be.

When I talk with couples about to be married, we discuss lots of situations that they will most likely encounter in their life together. The reason for doing this is to give them a chance to think through how they might or would like to respond to a challenge. Doing this in the hypothetical, when emotions are not involved, is relationship preparedness. How would you want to respond to being let down or hurt? Can you already have forgiveness close at hand instead of anger or walking away? What if your children turn out not to be perfect? Can you prepare yourself to love them all the more fiercely as they struggle? The marriage vows talk about sickness and economic uncertainty. These are the hard things but if a couple has really done some work and recognizes that these are also the times that strengthen and deepen a marriage it is easier to get through them intact. If you have already thought through a scenario, you've given yourself a map for how you will traverse the rough terrain. Viktor Frankl's map probably saved his life.

Jesus, so the Gospels tell us, was prepared for his death because he understood the purpose of his life. That life was dedicated to making divine love known and present in human life. That is required such a horrible death is a statement on how stubbornly blind humanity had and has become. No amount of sermons and heal miracles would get through to us. Only the most inconceivable response to suffering would explain things to us. In spite of the inhumanity, Jesus was prepared to return violence with love, to respond to hatred with love, to overcome despair and death with love.

We have the freedom and indeed the luxury to plan and practice such a response in the moments of our lives. Try it. Tomorrow morning when you wake up, decide that the day ahead of you will be one in which you respond to everything with only love. Once you have practiced it through a few frustrations or angry moments or pain stop and consider how you have helped the entire world simply by not getting annoyed or angry or vengeful. It's a beginning. It's what the people of Newtown are trying to do and I hope that we will join them in it as they hold on to their vision of world transformed from pain to peace.

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