



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

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

The Greatest Love

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

May 13, 2012

It happened more than 25 years ago, but, I still hear it clear as a bell. We were visiting grandparents in Venice, FL. They had a lovely home that backed up on the Venice Bay, a nice neighborhood. So it surprised me as we pulled out of their street to look out the window and see a whole bag full of trash that had obviously been tossed out of someone's car window. It's one of those things that never fail to get me riled up and I said out loud, "I can no more imagine myself throwing trash out of the window than I can imagine myself stabbing someone!" And this sweet little six year old voice came from the back seat, "Mom, I could imagine you stabbing someone!"

Over the years, I have managed to convince myself that my sweet daughter, Melanie, was remarking on what she has called "fierce love," sort of that "don't mess with my family" attitude that could be seen as a part of my personality. I do know that Melanie never had any doubt that I would put myself between her and harm in full mother bear mode should the need arise. And I cannot say that I would not use any and all means of defense necessary. I know that I would defend with my life those in my care. That is how I have managed to hear her youthful pronouncement - "Mom, I could imagine you stabbing someone!"

Jesus' refers to dying for one's friends as the greatest example of love. And then he practiced what he preached. He loved us so much that he allowed himself to be killed for our sake so that we might become better and know love more fully. In this extraordinary passage, Jesus brings together all of the important themes of his ministry; love, self sacrifice and what it means to be his disciples and friends. This friendship invites us into a new kind of life, in new relationship with the whole world. To be his friend is to obey his commandment to love to the point self-sacrifice. This is not easy faith, cheap grace or something confined to Sunday morning. It is the total commitment of your life and everything in it to God's vision of life as it was originally imagined. Being a Christian requires something of you.

France may not be an overtly religious country, at least not the Parisian part of it, but this scripture was never far from people's minds as they stood honoring the row after row of graves which hold the remains of those brave American boys who gave their lives for friends that they didn't even know. The French are humbled at the memory of such sacrifice even after all of these years. For a couple of Memorial Days, I had the honor of representing our country

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and offering prayers in the presence of aged veterans carrying tattered flags. Their eyes always misted as they remembered. I could almost hear a question within their frail dignity, "how was it possible that they loved us this much?" That is why the French have never thought of us as anything other than the ultimate friends.

Most of us are never put in situations that require such a sacrifice. We are not often asked to die for someone else. So are we to be denied the opportunity live out this great love? How about, instead of dying for others, we live for them? The only death that is required of us is the death of the ego and all of the fear that it manufactures. All things considered, I would rather live for others than die for obvious reasons but also that I might be blessed to do something for someone else over and over again. When you put someone else's interests ahead of your own, you not only live to tell about, you reap benefits beyond your imagining.

A recent edition of Ode Magazine, "the magazine for intelligent optimists" - was dedicated to the topic of giving. The cover proclaimed "Giving is Good...(it) improves health, spreads wealth, strengthens social bonds - and, best of all, it's contagious." The main article identifies the teachings from every major religion on giving. In Islam, it is considered one of the Five Pillars, "intended not only to provide welfare...but to purify the spirit of the giver (who is cleansed of greediness and selfishness) and the receiver (who is saved from the humiliation of begging and envy). The Buddha advocated giving because it "both acknowledges the interdependence we have for each other and is the active practice of letting go, which is where freedom from suffering lies." The Torah says, "If there is a needy person among you, don't harden your heart; don't shut your hand..." Along with today's scripture, St. Paul also says, "the one who sows sparingly will reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."

I would challenge Paul a little on that, given what we know about the neurological effects of giving. Learning to give and practicing it will turn you into a cheerful giver. As it turns out, giving is truly good for you. When we give, especially with no expectation of return, we produce the happy chemicals, dopamine and serotonin. If you regularly flood your body with dopamine and serotonin, you will begin to counter-balance the destructive stress hormones that harm your heart, your brain and just about every other part of you. The story of Cami Walker illustrates the power of giving. As a young successful writer in a high-powered advertising job, Cami was struck with debilitating MS. She lost the use of her hands, then the sight in one eye and was overcome by weakness and fatigue. Within two years, she had quit

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her job, become addicted to her medication and completely dependent on her husband. Luckily Cami was friends with a rather amazing person, an African medicine woman. One day, in desperation, Cami called her and she prescribed a ritual of giving - 29 gifts in 29 days. Cami's first gift was a call to someone with MS worse than her own. Having lifted her friend's spirits, she felt better herself. And so she continued. Her book entitled *29 Gifts; How a Month of Giving Can Change Your Life* became a best seller. She continues her regimen of giving in 29 day cycles along with people around the world who have joined in the idea of radical, intentional giving. Ever since that first act of giving, Cami's health has improved, her marriage is stronger and she is working again. Her story has been validated by many researchers. Giving is good for your health.

Branford Cares is the challenge before all of us and it has potential to create many kinds of well-being. As this project is launched this spring, the entire town of Branford is being invited to open minds and hearts about the growing number of people in our town who are without resources and worse, without hope. For too many, the good job went away but the bills stayed. Every bit of cost cutting has already been tried and now families and seniors on their own are forced into the cruel dilemma of choosing between electricity or gas in the car; which meal can they do without, how far can they fall behind on the mortgage before their precarious situation comes tumbling down. The story that galvanized me on this mission actually happened in Detroit. Russ Russell works for a feeding ministry called Forgotten Harvest and was interviewing families for a video project for potential donors. A little boy approached and told him that he wasn't going to eat. Russ asked him what he meant and the boy said, "It's not my turn to eat tonight, it's my brother's night; it's my turn tomorrow." I thought, "I can't let that happen in my town!" but those who work in the field in Branford assure me that it is already happening here.

This is Mother's Day. Put yourself in that mother's shoes, having to decide which of her children she can feed. Branford Cares is our opportunity to say "this will never happen here again."

I need all of you to help with this and it's as easy as gathering up the people on your block or at your office and saying "let's do something. Let's have a cookout or just take up a collection" Tell them the story of the children who don't get to eat every day. If everyone in Branford does something, we can reach our goal of \$300,000 this summer and it will make such a difference in the lives of many people nearby and in our town as a community. No one is asking you to die for your neighbors. I am asking you to use your life as an instrument of grace and generosity. You might save someone's life and you will make yours a whole lot better.

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