

Sermon

All Saints' Episcopal Church

The Rev. Martha Sterne
Proper 25
23 October, 2016



Grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus Christ.

A vision for a life: Run your race. Fight your good fight. Keep the faith.

On our return flight from Greece —Carroll is not a chatty person on an airplane so I have to amuse myself — I bought an hour of internet service and up popped a note from my brother which said, “Daddy passed twenty years ago today. Sad he’s gone but glad he’s resting.”

Wow, I’d forgotten. And I felt that sort of poignant, sweet and bitter swirl you get sometimes. Our dad did keep the faith. Not a big, flashy faith, but a humble, grumbly, doubting Thomas faith. And as we flew on and on, I thought about what a truly abysmal traveler he was and yet what a trouper! Because my mother never dreamed up an “atmospheric” itinerary that she didn’t love. Just use your imagination as to what ‘atmosphere’ could imply but hard to get to and ominously cheap come pretty close. Our poor father - the pre-trip angst, and then the rental car snafus and the little strange maps - they got lost daily, hourly. Mother spoke her own brand of Mississippi Spanish everywhere - Norway - she’s trying the Spanish while my dad was always fell prey to traveler’s woes including totally predictable gastro-intestinal disquietude. Really, he needed to just stay home with his dog and his record player and hear about trips from other people. But he ran the race for her, his beloved. Our father was the worst traveler in the world and yet he was just the best.

They were not alike. It was a marriage of opposites. We are not all alike which is nothing to be haughty about like the Pharisee in Luke’s gospel but really thank God we are not just like other people. How boring would that be?

We are not even like ourselves over time. Twenty-eight years ago, I came here full of mercy and daring for justice. Now I’m older and tired-er and I confess I don’t have the passion for mercy and justice so strong in me. So it’s just a miracle to be here and feel our shared beating heart for mercy and thirst for justice - since those aren’t any one person’s gifts. They won’t be your new rector’s gifts. The gifts of the Holy Spirit —wisdom, prophetic insight, hope, endurance, compassion, healing, encouragement - those are gifts of this Body - so sometimes you’ve got nothing but somebody in pew 14 has just what’s needed. Isn’t that a wonder? The Spirit forms us through each other even when we don’t know each other’s name. After all

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these years of being with you, I am weaker but I am stronger. I am less optimistic but more hopeful. I remember so much less than in early days, but through God's grace in this Body I know so deeply more.

Five of you literally and all of you in our shared spirit—were with me as I climbed up and, much harder, clambered down a gazillion Grecian sun-drenched stone steps and saw azure seas and many ancient wonders. Who are we human creatures—so sublime and so slaughterous? Is it our fear of death that drives every age's gorgeous creation and relentless destruction? The most beautiful thing I saw was found buried dark and deep in a grave - a queen's crown, an exquisite circlet of golden tiny floating flowers that would have shimmered and danced when she walked. What is this putting treasures in graves? And what is it with all the wars, wars, wars and that ain't just ancient news. Today with all our sophistication and tech savvy - we have reached a new high, make that a new low - according to the UN over sixty million people - half of them children - are wandering desperate on this earth displaced by persecution and war. Wrap your head around that. Then remember a small and holy counter-narrative that happened this very week. Thank you, Saints, you welcomed one more refugee family. This reaching out, one by one, is just the way Jesus healed and matters so much. For us as well as them.

On my trip - our official leaders were awesome - a retired Emory Old Testament and archaeology professor and a fiery brilliant, pessimistic hilarious Greek guide who looked exactly like Melina Mercouri. I asked her to talk to us about Greece today and O She Did. In her lived life, the economy is a shadowy wreck; the government is a distrusted mess. Her family has had financial downturns. Her Orthodox church - dispirited, her faith cynical but real. I'm going to remember her for a long time. Those two experts showed us remnants of civilization after civilization rising up fierce and rapacious to conquer in their turn - only to fall to the next - Christians of every stripe as ruthless as anybody else. Very discouraging - isn't - if the politics of movers and shakers is the only or the ultimate world we live in. But we are here because we sense it's not. We are here dear saints to witness to a different world order -and for at least a time not to pin our hopes and fears on one more good or bad king or good or bad president but to trust and follow the crucified savior and serve the world in all our callings and actions the ways he did.

There was this other leader, the bus driver, Stellios. A granddaddy with a huge smile and the heart of a lion which was Very Good, since Greece is one craggy mountain after the next and we went up almost all of them - my heart in my mouth. Stellios was a man of few words but immense care. A trustworthy general, a tactical genius, he steered us backwards to go forwards. He took us way down to go breath-takingly up. We made inconceivable twists on goat-path roads. And my favorite part - we dangled over cliffs. Okay that wasn't my favorite part. And when it came time to settle in for a night, Stellios would head into a village and guide our motley crew through one narrow, dark lane into another all the way to that night's home.

Truth be told, only when I started trusting the driver, did the adventures and gifts of the days shine. He was the worst teacher; didn't say a thing about the treasures and the battles and the gods. And yet he was the best.

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So what I want to say to you beloved saints is There is a driver. Trustworthy and strong though often silent. So let us trust and follow! And run the real races, not the rat races. Fight the good fights, not the phonies. Let us keep not the fear but the faith. And for God's sakes, let us enjoy the ride. For in us in Christ is the power not to conquer but to transform the world.

amen

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