

# Sermon

All Saints' Episcopal Church

The Rev. Martha Sterne  
2 April, 2017



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

Today, on this last Sunday of Lent, we hear of two deaths - the death of Lazarus and the pain of his family and that Jesus wept because he loved them. And I think he cried for all of us who love and lose over and over again for of course Lazarus did die again eventually, didn't he? Whatever, Jesus, the King of Love, wept. For as Wendell Berry writes, *You can't give yourself over to love for somebody without giving yourself over to suffering.* And our peculiar faith is that through the power and yes, sometimes the pain of Love, we are healed and Jesus did heal Lazarus spectacularly.

The other death scene is a valley filled with the dry and scattered bones of a once proud nation whose people have been taken captive and are in exile, their city left desolate and the Temple destroyed. Preceding the captivity had been a long failure of leadership and neighborliness and so a turning away from the purposes of the God. And thus the desiccation of the core values of neighborly faith - like those commandments we say as we begin each service in Lent which all point away from disdain of others and toward the common good. And the consequence of the sin of unneighborliness is always a valley of death.

So our suffering God says to Ezekiel as he stands among the bones - Speak to the bones. Tell 'em they're gonna live. And into the valley of death, the Word of life, of breath, of coming together, of mutual strength is spoken through a human voice - we've got those - and the scattered fragments become whole persons, become neighbors, become a resurrected people. Yes. And that is actually what I want right now in our country! The renewal of neighborliness - love your neighbor as yourself - for that is God's second command to us and we too will die in exile if we ignore it.

On Thursday night, I was here at a celebration of fierce neighborliness, the Covenant Community graduation. Ten of 'em did it together. Biggest ever, everybody cried. And my phone kept buzzing and finally I looked down and Carroll had texted me a gazillion times to let me know about the fiery collapse on 85. Boom - major artery of this city blown out. A Miracle nobody died, but now a huge loss of literally one of our chief pathways of life. How will we cope with this? I believe it is both a test and a chance to practice neighborliness and rubber-hit-the-road faith in our God who makes a way where there is no way, which God knows we need some.

My teacher here is a woman named Betty York and I offer her to you. We made friends in my earliest All Saints days back in the eighties through her pastor, Jerry Herron, who was our head sexton and in the tradition of All Saints' sextons, a great guy. For a while, their congregation gathered on Sunday afternoons in Ellis, and they had super music so sometimes I stayed for a while and listened. On other days of the week Betty would stop by to straighten out Jerry on some church issue, and I liked to witness that and learn from a master the art of handling big shot preachers. Also Betty and I shared a certain chubbiness, and she got us both t-shirts that said "I'm not fat; I'm fluffy." Fabulous woman.

She never married or had children though she loved a young woman named Cynthia who she called her "play daughter." Cynthia's mom had died and she struggled with severe mental illness and was jailed for a horrific, senseless deed she never would have done in her right mind.

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Betty doesn't drive and rides MARTA buses and trains everywhere and totes a pocketbook that could suffice for a crossing of the Sahara Desert. On MARTA, she goes to the grocery; she goes to the doctor; she visits her friends and makes pastoral calls and pays her bills and for many years did her house-cleaning business. She even recycled on MARTA before recycling was cool. She is entertained on MARTA; she prays on MARTA; she does ministry on MARTA for she gets where she needs to go in a neighborly way

Once a month for years and years Betty took the long trip across town to Metro, the now closed prison where her beloved Cynthia, served her long sentence. At least two buses, maybe three and a train—a hard journey that Betty took for love. What will you do for love? Cynthia had a terrible problem with cutting herself and she was in isolation often so Betty would sometimes get there and get turned away. Betty suffered and grieved for her and her brokenness. She said I can't fix her but I visit her like Jesus tells us to. Through the years she didn't do it self-righteously at all but she shamed me out of my obsessive anxiety over my children. With all the love she carried for Cynthia – a giant pocketbook full – she just didn't leave room for obsessive anxiety. Cynthia did die in prison. Betty was torn up but prayed through it, living the Wendell Berry and Jesus' truth that *You can't give yourself over to love for somebody without giving yourself over to suffering*. Betty suffered through and eventually said to me, well I know she's free.

Betty practices the Christian faith more fluidly than any human being I have ever known. She wakes up in the morning praying. Lord help me be a blessing today. Because she'd say, **Mawtha if you be a blessing, you are blessed.** I have never known a more blessed person. She is real; she is not fearful; she sees abundance everywhere she looks; she honors herself and her neighbors; she laughs at human ridiculousness including her own and loves anyway; she gets mad and gets over it; she tells the truth in love. Mainly she loves and is beloved. And she gets peacefully where she needs to go right on time. God's time. She trusts God to make her life blessed and blessing. And God is faithful.

Now God's blessing is not just a pat on the head by God saying you go girl, you go boy. To be blessed is related to being blood-wounded. In fencing to be *blessé* is to be cut, to have life-blood flow, so the blessing is also the wound. As in by Christ's wounds, we are healed to be wounded healers and on and on.

Back to our I-85 collapse. I haven't talked to Betty in a while. But I know what she would say. ***Y'all be a blessing and you will be blessed.***

Okay for a lot of us this traffic thing is gonna be hard. But let's cope; let's flex; let's car pool; those of us that can get to MARTA, let's do it and make room for the others. Who knows we may get the civic will to do what we've needed to do forever – expand MARTA. So let's work smarter and play simpler. Let's assess – is this trip necessary? Maybe let's stay home and hang out with our neighbors. Let's practice renewed neighborliness. And when you see Betty, and you will, for she has 10,000 holy disguises, you tell her hey and let her bless you and you bless her. And let's just see how loving our journeys can become.

Amen