

Sermon

All Saints' Episcopal Church

The Rev. Martha Sterne
March 5, 2017



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

Moses: *Choose life.*

My mother was uber organized. She was a masters-level duplicate bridge player and always knew what she had in her hand and what everybody else had she planned six plays ahead. This gift for organization was wonderful when I needed it and frustrating when I wanted to do stuff my own bumbling this way and that way kind of way. No matter how things turned out with any of us, Mother never said I told you so – that was a rule of hers – but you always knew she knew you knew that she was right.

After their three children were more or less launched, my parents ran a de facto retreat center. My father got a lot of credit for he was kind and a doctor so like me he received reflected appreciation from his profession – but my mother was the one who got down there beside you in whatever ditch you'd fallen or been pushed into. When her sister got a divorce, when her nieces and nephews and eventually great nieces and nephews and young cousins were in school or job limbo or when an older relative needed some TLC, they would sort of move in for however long it took. When one of her own children or grandchildren was struggling or someone who worked in her home or her close friends, she was right there as well with resources, savvy, tons of courage to borrow, and of course opinions. Unfortunately – and I have noticed this about myself – as she aged she did not deign to wait until you **asked** for her opinion. All in all she was a remarkable, pragmatic, intensely engaged, caring person.

I tell you all this because though my mother lived a life of service, competence, and generosity, towards the end of her life she described an emptiness. She said to me, I don't think I have an interior life. And as I am getting less active, I literally don't know what to do. I didn't understand her because of course she had an interior life – we all do, don't we – and she was such a great thinker-outer and an avid reader – that's certainly evidence of interior life isn't it? This conversation worried me for she was reaching out – the most independent person on earth who had never needed or accepted any help – and I didn't know how to respond and I was afraid.

Walter Brueggemann says that people formed in the Calvinist tradition most easily understand God as judiciary for John Calvin was in fact a lawyer. So God appears to be primarily judge and that view certainly is streamed in one of the major currents of scripture. We just heard Moses say *If you obey God's commandments, then* God will bless you. Very quid pro quo.

Mother did follow those commandments – in bridge and in life – for she was formed in a seriously Calvinist family. She got what Moses said about the clarity of following the law - I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life and my mother really did. So what was this emptiness which she did not call pain but it was? For competence and right choices – sometimes they can't touch what hurts. Pain is complex and messy and disordered. And healing is complex and messy and disordered, and as we age, healing is more and

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more mystery and increasingly inward. I don't think Mother ever had any encouragement to admit bewilderment or pain. We who loved her were all so glad she was strong, and she basked in that gladness. And though she was in church most every Sunday – and I know it helped her stand up for the right and help others – her tradition did not give her the language and liturgy of common prayer, the esthetics, the sacraments and all the gifts that are for us part of the **inward journey** toward the deepest pain and the deepest healing – that happens **in here and in here. That's in action.**

Watch Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount this morning – moving from the just don't do rhetoric of the ten commandments – don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't swear – to the interior ecosystem inside each of us – what about your anger? What about your lust? What about your grudges, your contempt, in Greek, your raka, literally your spittle? There is this whole life inside you that lights up or darkens your days, freezes you or warms you, guides you intuitively or blindly trips you up, make you glad to be alive no matter the circumstances or takes away your capacities for life. Remember that Jesus is speaking to a crowd of oppressed, militarily occupied people in a ruthless era – and yet even with all that disturbing stuff going on outside, he still and always first pivots to the inner life – and taught his disciples through the ages as well as people like Gandhi – to harness the power of the prepared inner life. Gandhi stood down an empire and also Martin King built the whole civil rights movement around these very Sermon on the Mount passages. Jesus teaches us to pivot first to the interior life as the one where the real battle rages and where the power of God resides. Inward journey. In act. In action. Before you act out.

Here's Carl Jung, my best guide to the land of light and shadow inside us:

*What if I should discover that the least among all, the poorest of all the beggars, the most impudent of all the offenders, the very enemy himself – that these are within me, and that I myself stand in need of the alms of my own kindness – that I myself am the enemy who must be loved – what then? (Jung and Jesus say, we don't love the enemy within too hot.) **Yet the acceptance of oneself is the essence of the whole moral problem and the epitome of a whole outlook on life.***

My mother was brutally honest – she told me that she had never learned to feel at home and I think to get beyond the critique in her interior life – have you? And I know in her dotage that she grew bitter and angry for she could not forgive herself for being dependent, useless, needy. And I am still learning years later to forgive myself for my lack of charitable imagination for the other within my mother and the blindness of the anxious other inside me.

Mother would have never planned the way the day of her death played out. No family was there – her three children busy leading righteous lives in Denver and Phoenix and Atlanta. Instead present that day in her home in Jackson, Mississippi, was this trinity: her trusted central caregiver Ernestine – perfect death-day companion. Tara who cut Mama's hair and whose husband had recorded my long-dead father's one and only country music composition – that's a long story but believe me – Tara was perfect companion. And then a hospice nurse who was a Catholic nun and to tell truth, Mother, like her mother before her, did not like catholic nuns – I guess it was some kind of protestant Mississippi tribal thing, whatever – but in God's tough love grace, the catholic nun hospice nurse – perfect companion. So my mother had not spoken clearly in a while but she said to the three of

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them out of her suddenly lit up with love and peace interior world, she said clearly “I will see my husband this day.” And that makeshift holy trinity got around her bed and held hands and sang Amazing Grace and she died. And I believe she was given entrance to a new land of peace and joy in reunion with my father and the saints in light. It was as Mother used to say - just right.

Here’s a John O’Donohue blessing for your inward action, your interior world:

May you awaken to the mystery of being here and enter the quiet immensity of your own presence. May you have joy and peace in the temple of your senses. May you respond to the call of your gift and find the courage to follow its path. May warmth of heart keep your presence aflame and may anxiety never linger about you. May your outer dignity mirror an inner dignity of soul. May you take time to celebrate the quiet miracles that seek no attention. May you be consoled in the secret symmetry of your soul. May you experience each day as a sacred gift woven around your heart of wonder.

Let’s choose life. Amen