

Sixth Sunday of EASTER, April 27 2008
Acts 17:22-31; Psalm 366:7-18, 1 Peter 3:13-22, John 14:15-21
Prepared by the Rev. Dr. Seamus P. Doyle

Always have your answer ready for those who ask you the reason for the hope that you have within you. But give it to them with gentleness and reverence and with a clear conscience.

Mary Ann Mc Cartney's son Tom left home to go to college at the age of eighteen. At first he called home on a regular basis and then less regularly. Finally he asked them not to call him, disconnected his phone and relocated. The family that was once a tight knit family was torn, broken, devastated. They began to wonder what they had done wrong? They began to question every change they had seen in Tom throughout his adolescent years to see if there was something they had missed.

One by one the family began to grow through the process known as the Grief process.. One night Tom called home and asked his parents to meet him. They boarded a plane the next morning and flew to the destination but Tom failed to show up. Anger, hurt, wondering if they had failed God, what went wrong in their child rearing of this particular son. They returned home even more devastated. It would be seven years before they were able to conclude the Grief process and go on with their lives

There were those in their local and church community who had answers and advice: "trust in God, everything will be fine." "Pray for forgiveness for whatever you may have done wrong and he will return." "I wouldn't worry. If the police are not calling you he must be okay." "God has a reason for this and it's not your place to question. Leave it to God and everything will be fine."

At those times when they were recycling through the Denial, Anger and Bargaining stages of the Grief process, Mary Ann and Harry snapped back at these pious statements. They had begun to question God. They had begun to question why they believed in God; what kind of God would do this to them; what kind of cruel God had taken their kid off somewhere they could not contact him? They ceased going to church on a regular basis and they began to withdraw from almost everyone. They were growing into the stage of depression.

One afternoon Harry was in the grocery store and for a brief moment made eye contact with a neighbor who had just moved in a few weeks earlier. Harry wanted to avoid him but could not. The elderly gentleman walked up to him, shook hands with him and put his other hand on his shoulder. "I just heard about your son." He said. Harry stiffened, wondering what gossip was going on after six years. Harry lifted his eyes. The elderly man continued, "I have no idea what it must be like for you to lose a son and not know where he is. You must be broken hearted." That was it. A simple statement, a handshake, a hand on his shoulder, and Harry began to cry a flood of tears he never knew existed within him. The man gently maneuvered Harry over to a nearby corner of the store and stood there with him. As Harry composed himself, the old man said, "Harry, if you need to talk, come by the house" and he walked off.

It was none of the Old man's business where Harry's son was. It was not his place to come into Harry's life and stir up wounds that were still raw. And yet this gentle man took a chance in stating that he had no idea what it must be like to walk in Harry's shoes, offered him a hand of friendship and remained present to him while he processed what had happened.

For the first time in six years someone came to Harry without an answer or a pious statement. He offered nothing but concern and the honesty that he had no idea how to handle such a situation. And yet in that gentle and reverent manner he opened the door to the healing process that Harry and Mary Ann needed.

Later in the week they visited this new neighbor; shared their story like they had never done before; opened their hearts and home to this person whom they did not know but who had opened his heart and home to them without even knowing them.

Now who will harm you if you are committed to do what is good? And blessed are you if you have to suffer for being honest. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated. Simply proclaim the Lord Jesus holy in your hearts, and always have your answer ready when people who ask you the reason for the hope that is within you. Give it with courage and respect and with a clear conscience.

One of the sad realities of the past twenty years is that the word Evangelism has become something of a dirty word that mainline churches, and the Episcopal church in particular, avoids at all cost. Evangelism is not about preaching the Gospel. Evangelism is not about bringing people to church. Evangelism is about being present and letting God work through us to help others experience the love of God.

Harry and Mary Ann learned that the old man's name was Tracy. Over the next year of talking they put together his own story of being abused as a child, a history of drug/alcohol abuse, in and out of prison, divorces, attempts of going to church and finally finding peace of mind.

As they learned to laugh with one another he was able to share that he felt Harry's pain many times in the store prior to their meeting. He had seen the sadness in his eyes and the lack of a smile on his face.

Harry and Ann found a new church, a new social group, but most importantly they had found a real friend in Tracy. Tracy was one of those rare persons who had lived life rough and yet found that power greater than himself that gave him peace of mind and a strength to be a presence to others. Harry had embraced his own negative past, had discovered that becoming whole did not mean to be perfect but rather it meant to embrace all aspects of one's personality. He had reached that point in his spiritual journey in life when he *held sacred* the commandment to love, to forgive, to be compassionate.

Tracy did not preach. He was simply a presence. He maintained a conscious contact with God on a daily basis, prayed only for the knowledge of God's will for him and asked God to help him do what was right. In the course of time, Tracy grew from being an angry young man, a resentful adult, to a mature spiritual person. When asked how he was always so peaceful he simply told his story and how God had worked in his life to bring him peace of mind and that he had learned to live one day at a time and to forgive himself and others for the past.

To finish the story. Seven years after he left home, Tom contacted his parents. He shared with them the journey of his life, his pain, hurt, shame and guilt and eventually his

joy. Because of their sharing with Tracy they were much more open to listen in silence as their son poured out his soul to them and then they shared with him.

The family then flew to where he lived and were there for his wedding. His partner was fully accepted by his family and, while their life is not a fairy tale, the reality is that through one man sharing with gentleness and reverence, Tom's parents found the peace and wholeness they had been seeking. Their woundedness became a basis for a ministry to others and a discovery of strengths and gifts the might otherwise have known existed within them.

Through Tracy, they learned to say with the psalmist: *Come and listen, all you who fear God, and I will tell you what God has done for me...Blessed be God who has not rejected my prayer, nor withheld God's love from me.*