

6 Easter:
John 14-23-29
May 22, 2022
Mary Barnett

I've been thinking alot this week about the holy spirit, and not just because it is threaded all through all our readings for today! The Holy Spirit: the Advocate that Jesus says the Father will send in His name. The Holy Spirit who will guide us and nurture us and empower us after Jesus has gone. The Holy Spirit who will remind us of *everything* Jesus said to us when he was with us.

Because I am going away Jesus says AND I am coming to you

These mysterious comings and going, absences and presences somehow happening at the same time, as occurs sometimes in our own griefs. And, I was thinking about the Holy Spirit, not only because it was threaded through all our readings for today, but *also* because this was the week that we as the Episcopal Church in CT would elect a new bishop. This work is said to be a working together of the will of the clergy, the will of the lay delegates elected by each parish and the working of the Holy Spirit....but how exactly does that happen?

How do we know the difference between the inner turmoil of our own preferences and passions and the promptings of some deeper and wiser spirit? Between our will or the will of some majority or the fears of some majority and God's will? And just because I win can I rest assured that it was God's will? And if I lose? What about the other person? Isn't crediting the Holy Spirit and the will of God only to our side how wars happen?

A wise person said to me yesterday: the Holy Spirit does not elect a Bishop, we do. But it is the Holy Spirit working *within* that person that has the power to make them a *great* bishop

I do think that in my own experience when the holy spirit is present there comes both a fire within and eventually a kind of peace, a deep peace not like the world gives but a peace that allows me to do hard things: to feel my courage and my vulnerability working together instead of opposed to each other. The next Bishop will need this partnership to accomplish great things. So do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

Before he died Ted gave me a remarkable book: *The Nearness of God: Parish Ministry as Spiritual Practice*. Like many moments w Ted...the mere the

title of the book, glimpsed as I reached out my hand to accept it from his large hand, as we prayed together on my purple couch, already taught me something. *The Nearness of God: Parish Ministry as Spiritual Practice*

Mind you I've been given plenty of other books to prepare me for my ministry with you: **How to Hit the Ground Running: A Quick Start Guide for Congregations with New Leadership** was a particularly popular one. And now this...? *The Nearness of God : Parish Ministry as Spiritual Practice*. The title itself advised me first off to **STOP** running and secondly, to assiduously refrain from hitting **anything**. It invited me to take many breaths and to let myself deepen until I found my true foundation *in God*. Not the idea of God or the practice of God or the philosophy of God or the Nicene Creed of God but the presence of God: here and now and in me.

God then was not something to reach up out of my body for but to recognize as already present, eternally, beneath my striving. If only I would settle (*so hard*) and trust (*so so hard*) and stop doing anything (I mean *really* hard) and *listen* : to myself, to God and to you.

Our new Bishop Diocesan, Jeffrey Mello was finally elected yesterday afternoon on the 6th ballot by a majority of both clergy and lay delegates. And you know what? I think Jeff would really like Ted's book. I think when Jeff starts in CT in October, he won't hit the ground running but will find God in the ground of his being and listen for the Holy Spirit resonating in the ground of our beings and in the unique contexts of our churches and lead from there. And I think that's what a majority of people heard in him and trusted.

Jeff is by all accounts a humble and pastoral person. He has been married for some 30 years to the same man. The two have raised an adopted son together who is now 21. Formerly a social worker and hospice chaplain, Jeff calls himself first and foremost a pastor. His vision is one of healing and hope. He believes **the Episcopal church** is the world's best kept secret. And he believes the world needs this secret with his whole heart. And it is up to all of us to share it. Please start by sharing our services on your social media.

When our new Bishop, Jeff looks out at CT, I don't think he sees buildings and properties and potential partnerships, important as those are

for the future of the church. I think he sees *people*. Peop[le who are hungry on their insides and on their outsides. People who are hungry for food on *and* for spiritual nourishment. People standing both on the inside and on the outside of our churches. and nourishment

People hungry for deeper connection with other people and for good food and for spiritual nourishment: for new life and for a transcendent God who wants them to come fully alive

I think Ted saw something like this too.

Ted assured me repeatedly that he thought we were on the right track. Sometimes he even told me I was on the right track. We are coming closer together, he said. We are coming more alive. Can't you feel it? Can you see it?

And as I walked around the greening world this week, aware of all the things to be anxious about I realized that I too, like Jeff... am so full of hope for the Episcopal church, for the ways I believe it can **UNIQUELY** respond to the hungers and loneliness and fears of **THIS** time. And I'm full of hope and excitement for *this* particular church...poised here on Main St in Middletown, in a ideal

location to respond to those needs: our own deep needs and those outside our doors We will meet that need in ourselves and in others by listening ever more deeply and courageously to each other and by being willing to be surprised and changed and empowered by what we hear.

In the passage, right before our reading from Acts today, Paul tries and tries to go to Bithynia in Asia but the spirit won't let him go that way, It is foiling his well laid strategic plan. I mean he is sure it is the way he is supposed to go! After all, Bithynia is where he wants to spread the Gospel!...isn't that what God wants? But, for some reason he can't get there.

Instead that night Paul has a dream, a vision : a man from Macedonia (the area of present day Greece) begs Paul to come over and help *him* but heck, it's completely in the wrong direction. But, OK, Paul gathers his companions and they head to Macedonia, a place he has long resisted. It's a long journey. Many stops and starts. Much pausing for prayer and direction and supplies. When he and his friends finally get to Philippi in Macedonia, they spend a few days knocking around the city but nothing much happens. Finally on the sabbath, they decide to leave the synagogue

and walk right out of the city and wander down by the river where there are a bunch of women praying. But wait. What's that about? **They were looking for a man, remember?** But oh well...who knows. So they sit down. They wait. They pray. They worship. They turn again. They wait. They pray. They worship. They turn again. In fact they are practicing the very steps our presiding Bishop Curry has outlined as the Way of love. A spiritual practice I recommend. They sit and talk for a while to a woman named Lydia, a merchant and weaver of purple cloth. We hear that her heart is opened.

We know very little about Lydia but what we know is worthy of note. She is a financially independent business woman: purple cloth is both beautiful and expensive to procure. She is the head of her own household, a woman of substance, a gentile, drawn to the Jewish religion; to one God and not the customary pantheon of greek Gods. She is not connected to a man (at least none is mentioned) and it is *on her own authority* that her entire household is subsequently baptized. She is important to the story of God. Later, when Paul is released from prison, he goes straight to Lydia's house for resources, rest and support. Somehow in some way that we don't fully

know, Lydia helps shape the church of the future. Our church. Oh come
holy spirit come

Sometimes our best attempts feel like failure. Why can't I make this
thing happen that I want so much? Why these road blocks? But then at
other times you pull off some massive journey with the help of a whole lot
of other people, through no forced effort on your own, like when the
people stood up last week and agreed to make some last minute **tonnage**
of shepherd's pie for the soup kitchen today. Or last Friday when a very
small group of CHT parishioners pulled off a remarkable cookout on the
lawn for some 50 members of our street neighborhood. Come Holy Spirit
Come.

Our remaining reading from today is from Revelation about the holy
city of Jerusalem descending from heaven on a cloud. This city is so full of
the spirit of God that it needs no temple. And it is so suffused with the
light of God that it needs no sun. It is lit from within. Its gates will never
be shut because this city has no fear. Its holy spaces are open to everyone
because the light within it is so powerful that it can not be defiled. What a
generous and holy vision for the church. Come Holy Spirit come!

And here's a story:

Last week I officiated at a wedding for an old friend's daughter. They aren't connected to this church at all. At the wedding I was introduced to my friend Danielle's best friend from way back in 8th grade: Gary, a man with native and African American roots whose brother had just died. We talked about this for a long time. About 45 minutes in, it turned out that Gary's mother's oldest friend was Ted Cooledge and Gary told me about how Ted helped him when he was in agony about his own child with down syndrome. He seriously wondered if she should die. Ted became his spiritual director. Ted said "you never know what the holy spirit will bring to fruition" and in the process, Gary's heart opened and his suffering was relieved and he felt peace, a great peace not from this world and then Gary was able to pour hope and more hope into his daughter and now his daughter is 35 and an artist in her own right. It was a remarkably light-filled conversation that went on as people danced, and ate and drank and then we parted company. Dave and I said goodbye and we left. But as I walked to the car, my heart was just burning within me and I went back. I had a question.

Would his daughter I wondered be interested in showing her work in our gallery in the fall over Columbus/Indigenous People's day? It could also be a way to honor the Wogunk and Quinnipiac tribes on whose ancient lands we live and whose ancestry they shared.

There are moments, catch them...when we are suffused with light. We carry our temples right on our backs, and what we freely give away returns to us. Come Holy Spirit Come.

Ted's book *The Nearness of God* will go in Coolidge Corner for Contemplation that we are making in the back of the church : It's the place where the pews make a corner where Ted used to pray in silence before the service. We will consecrate it together in the fall. The fountain his family gave will go there: living and moving water to nourish our prayer. There will be a small library of his books. When you find the *Nearness of God*, take a look at the first page. What Ted neglected to mention to me is that the book is specially dedicated to him and to Joy, by the author.

Come Holy Spirit come

Maybe when Bishop Jeff Mello comes sometime next year, to visit our wonderful and holy and growing church and the two of us are sitting for a moment on the purple couch, in my office. Maybe I will have a copy of the *Nearness of God*, to give him.

Amen

