

July 27, 2008
Proper 12
The Rev. Sylvia Sweeney

One of the advantages of having a college kid home from college is that our house has become sort of a mini movie theatre where most any hour of the day or night as long as Molly is home, you are only a few minutes away from the start of some movie. The other night I entered the family room just in time to be invited to sit down to a viewing of the movie 21. 21 is a movie about a brilliant MIT student who gets mixed up in a scheme to outsmart Las Vegas casinos by counting cards. Just a couple of minutes into the movie there is a scene where a Las Vegas thug severely beats someone he caught counting cards. The enforcer's final words to the gambler were "Now count backward from 5 to 1 so I know you don't have brain damage and then I can let you go home."

Knowing that Molly's tolerance for on screen violence is way higher than mine I said, "Tell me now if the hero of this movie is going to get brain damage or not, because if he is, I'm not watching it!" And Molly assured me that he was not going to have his brains pummeled out of him by the end of the movie. Indeed, my deepest fears for the character in the movie definitely would not be realized. She knew because she'd already seen the end. And my knowing that changed everything about the way I saw the movie. I could live through the scary scenes. I could live through the violence. I could live through all the painful parts of the movie, because while I didn't know exactly how it would end, I knew it was not going to end in tragedy. However it was going to end, evil would not triumph over good.

Our real lives are like that too if we are living as Christians and truly believe the message of salvation. In real life we find ourselves repeating those amazing faith filled mantras of Paul's in those moments when life seems scariest. Jesus knew the end of the movie. Paul knew

because Jesus had already seen it. Paul could tell us the end so that we would never have to be too afraid to live our own lives. No matter how scary life got, we would always know that a loving, forgiving God was busy in every corner of this world, in every moment of its creation bringing life out of death. Snatching good from the very jaws of evil.

It is an extraordinary thing to stand staring into the face of human suffering and speak these words... We can be assured that

All things....all things....no matter how painful, no matter how unjust, no matter how sudden and unexpected, no matter how frightening, no matter how alienating, no matter how violent and obscene...all things do through God's eternal vigilance work together so that good can triumph over evil and God's new creation can come to pass... when our lives are lived in love of God and in pursuit of God's true purposes on earth. When you can not only say that, but live that, in the darkest moments of your life, then the whole story of your life is changed. Not because evil doesn't exist anymore or because you are rescued from suffering, Lord knows there are more faithful people living in suffering than escaping it. But like the movie I was watching with Molly....when you've already learned the ending to the story is that God is making all things new, then you can make it through the scary parts by holding onto God's hand and God's promise during the bad parts along the way.

Paul said, Even in the midst of life's greatest calamities, even in those moments when life taunts us and tempts us to believe that God has abandoned us, I am persuaded....I am persuaded by the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus the Christ, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus. Do you believe that? Do you believe that God's love can reach into the darkest, most grief filled corners

of your life and make you whole? Because that is what faith is. It is not about believing in God's love when you are surrounded by everything you've ever wanted. It is about believing in God's love even when everything you treasure is gone!

One of the hard parts about living as Christians in this age is that not only do many of us not really know the stories of faith, but even the stories we do know, we often forget because they seem so far away from our own lived experience. We forget that Jacob was tricked into marrying Leah and that Leah was her whole life long the truest victim of that trickery and yet one day Rachel's son would save her children from starvation. We forget the context of the, oh so familiar, words we hear in today's Gospel and in today's Epistle. We forget who is saying them and what it meant for those words to come out of the hearts and the souls of both Paul and Jesus.

Now I tell you it is one thing to be sitting in a half million dollar house with a car full of gas and a refrigerator full of groceries repeating "All things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to God's purposes". It is quite another to be sitting in prison all alone ostracized from one's family and tribe and believe that message as Paul did.

It is one thing to believe that faith is the pearl of great price when you are sitting in priestly finery counting the proceeds of the day and waiting for your meal to be served to you. It is another to believe that faith is the pearl of great price when you are hanging on a cross dying for the faith you believe in.

We who have so much, forget that it is only from the place of having nothing that one has the right to declare what is truest and most valuable in this world. It is only in the moments when we choose hope rather than despair, when we cling to the realization that one day good will truly triumph over evil...even when that day is not anywhere to be seen on the horizon. That is

the time when faith becomes real and truly becomes our own. It is the moment when in the midst of the bloodiest, scariest part of the movie that is our life we can hang onto the promise of how it ends. That is what faith is.

Those who have stood on the edge of death and suffering and loss and peered in know that life is about peeling away the layers of the onion until one comes to its very heart. Many of you know that for me this summer has been that kind of peeling away, a grappling with the potential loss of absolutely everything that has made me, me. It is not an unusual place to find one's self now and then on life's journey. But I have to say this time more has been peeled away than at any other time in my life. One day I was standing on the edge of the darkness peering in...looking for something, anything to hold onto ...and I remembered some words I had heard weeks before. On the occasion of his introduction to the diocese, our new assistant bishop had stood up and said,

I am Steve Charlston and I am a follower of Jesus of Nazareth. And I knew in that moment what it is that I will always have to hold onto for the rest of my life. I am Sylvia Sweeney and I am a follower of Jesus of Nazareth. I now know, that is who I am at the very center of my heart...

When everything else has been taken away, I will still and always be Sylvia Sweeney, a follower of Jesus of Nazareth

On that day which inevitably comes when all the outer layers have been peeled away...what will you find lies at the center of your heart?