

THE TIME BETWEEN
Sermon preached by the Rev. Sarah Segal McCaslin
May 30, 2010

There is a concept in physical fitness known as Muscle Confusion, which describes a rotation of cardio and strength training that ‘confuses’ the muscles in order to achieve peak performance. One day might be devoted to kick-boxing, another to plyometrics (a strange workout that consists entirely of jumping up and down), another day for yoga, and another reserved for push-ups and squats, and so on. The net result is more strength in less time, without the dreaded ‘plateau’ that often comes with too much routine in one’s workout. The legs don’t get used to running; the arms don’t become accustomed to the push-ups; the abs don’t anticipate the crunches. The muscles don’t know what’s coming next, and so they can’t set the autopilot. Confusion is good, according to this theory; predictability is bad.

I was thinking about Muscle Confusion last Sunday, when we celebrated Pentecost and received the confirmation class into membership. The order of worship was noticeably different—the Introit came after the Call to Worship and the Prayer of Confession took place sitting down and the Reception of Confirmands happened at the very end. I observed all of us clutching our bulletins a little tighter last week, following along a little more closely, afraid that we might stand up or sit down at the wrong time. And then, to top it all off, the Children’s Choir led us in a jubilant song that invited congregational participation, a relative rarity on Sunday mornings. We raised our hands with the children and shouted, “Ecta!”

It was a perfect Pentecost, with the bewildering winds of the Holy Spirit whipping around us, keeping us on our toes. We experienced a certain amount of spiritual muscle confusion last week, shaking up the routine to which we are accustomed, stretching us just a bit beyond our limits, challenging us to find our balance and strength without the training wheels and safety rails of our spiritual muscle memory. I think we did a good job. We left worship a little breathless last week, and hopefully a lot exhilarated. And that’s what Pentecost is all about, really.

For those of you as curious as me, ‘ecta’ means ‘unity’ in Hindi, a term that would fit well with today’s liturgical celebration of the Trinity. The week following Pentecost is set aside in our church calendar to reflect upon the theological concept of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and today is the day when I could reveal to you all of the secrets of the Trinity—how the three fit together, in such a way that we can still use the term monotheist, even when it so obviously appears to be otherwise. I could describe how the definition of the Trinity as three in one is so critically different from one in three, which, to use the Greek words that I can’t pronounce, differ in only one letter. That difference alone created conflict that took up the better part of two centuries in the early church.

But I think I’ll save that sermon for another time. Today is Trinity Sunday, and today is also two weeks after the end of the Easter season and one week after Pentecost, the birthday of the Church. We are just barely removed from the Easter images of resurrection, and the Pentecostal flames dancing over the heads of that first community, working the crowd into a frenzy as the disciples proclaimed the mighty works of God in dozens of languages. We are, after all of this liturgical excitement, on the cusp of the long season of Ordinary time, when we must

practice being the church of the resurrected Christ that we have been celebrating so well in these many weeks of spring.

Part of our identity as the church is the reality that we live in the time between - the time between Christ's ministry and presence on Earth, and the future time when God's cosmic plan for the whole inhabited Earth, the *oikumene*, will be revealed once and for all. The time between has lasted longer than anyone could have expected, especially Paul, our faithful theologian, who counseled early Christians to do away with the entrapments of this world (like romantic relationships) in order to focus more intently on the imminent return of Christ.

The time between is all we have ever known, and are likely to know in our mortal lives, unless the end-time predictors finally get one right, and we are invited into the surreal world of the *Left Behind* series, with moving cars emptied of their drivers, and airplanes of both pilot and passenger.

We are commissioned, in the absence of such a dramatic apocalypse, to plug along as a post-resurrection community of faith, moving ever farther away from the historical time and place of the one we call the Christ. We hold fast to Scripture, our scrapbook and faded journal, to tell of our faith's history in stories and images, our only tangible connection to a past long since crumbled into dust and bones, clinging to the words for clarification and assurance that the time between is really what it says it is, with something before and something yet to come.

It's not easy, not ever, to live in the time between, but it is least easy when the going gets rough, and the eastern and western rising and setting of God's incarnational presence are out of sight, beyond the horizon, and we are stuck in the middle, wrestling with the hurts of this life. The future consummation of God's plan seems mythic, or in the realm of science fiction, or just naïve optimism; it no longer feels like a concrete reality to be experienced in the here and now.

Paul, in his letter to the Roman Church, offers his version of comfort and assurance to early believers who shared an inkling of what we are now experiencing, a time between that is much longer than anticipated and not all puppies and roses. In poetic formulation, Paul promises that our justification will lead to our sanctification, fancy theological words that don't adequately convey the simple message that God will do what God has promised, rest assured. We are justified by faith through grace, says Paul; we are made right with God because God desires that it be so. And if we are made right by God, we are liberated to pursue a relationship with God in utter freedom and thanksgiving, and in the confidence that God's promises will be kept, now and in a time beyond our knowing.

In the meantime, the time between, Paul invites us to celebrate our hope in God's promises kept (though not yet fully revealed), even so much as to rejoice in our personal and collective sufferings, confident that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint. Easier said than done.

Paul did not have in mind a Monty Python image of the Jesus-like character of Brian on the cross singing, "Always look on the bright side of life." Nor does Paul, who encountered plenty of his own suffering during his ministry, invite suffering for the sake of producing its 'positive' benefits. If there are positive benefits to the trials and tribulations of life, we will discover them by necessity and inevitability, not by choice.

There is a tiny little book I found on my bookcase recently, entitled *Good Grief*.¹ It is a simple resource with satisfying, if flimsy, counsel on dealing with grief. If grief is a reality, the

author begins; its outcome need not be utterly desolating and void of benefit. Whether we like it or not, grief leads us to the edge of the abyss and reveals to us a terrible beauty. Or, as a friend wrote recently, reflecting on her own trials, she has begun to notice “the strange way that suffering can make our eyes more open and our hearts bigger...”

Paul’s letter to the Romans is not an endorsement of suffering or grief as tools for achieving deeper faith, but a recognition that we have a choice in how we live in the time between, moving past the hope for perfection (that is always and only an allusion) and finding a new dwelling place in the promises that God has made to us, on our behalf, and out of pure grace and true love. The more we cling to the grace and love of God, says Paul, the more readily available will be the option of finding endurance, character and hope in the midst of pain. We boast or exult or rejoice in our sufferings because we can count on God to be there, in it, with us, no matter what, for as long as it takes to get us out on the other side.

And how do we know that to be true? Paul tells us, “Because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” The Holy Spirit, our Advocate and Helper and Counselor, has been designated by God to stay with us during this time between. In John’s Gospel, Jesus assures his disciples that they will not be left alone in his absence, but will be sustained through the power of the Holy Spirit, who will keep the Word alive, making Jesus available to all who could not encounter him during his earthly ministry. We haven’t been left alone to bide this time between. We may experience this time as a wilderness, but we are not wandering in the wilderness without guidance- that has never been true in the story of our faith. Even in the wilderness, God’s presence is palpable, physical, and generous.

In Colum McCann’s latest novel, *Let the Great World Spin*, the first narrator, a young Irishman, struggles from childhood to understand the peculiarity of his younger brother’s faith. By the tender age of 11, Corrigan, or Corrie, was sneaking out of bed in the dark of night to give away his blankets and the clothing from his back to the alcoholics, prostitutes and ne’er-do-wells of inner-city Dublin, even drinking with them in solidarity, only sneaking back into the top bunk in the early morning light, muttering his prayers as he drifted off to sleep. To his brother’s incredulity, Corrigan found life and purpose in the alleyways and speakeasies of Ireland in his youth and then, as an adult and Catholic priest, in the projects and under the overpasses of the South Bronx:

What Corrigan wanted was a fully believable God, one you could find in the grime of the everyday. The comfort he got from the hard, cold truth- the filth, the war, the poverty- was that life could be capable of small beauties. He wasn’t interested in the glorious tales of the afterlife or the notions of a honey-soaked heaven... Rather he consoled himself with the fact that, in the real world, when he looked closely into the darkness he might find the presence of a light, damaged and bruised, but a little light all the same. He wanted, quite simply, for the world to be a better place, and he was in the habit of hoping for it. Out of that came some sort of triumph that went beyond theological proof, a cause for optimism against all the evidence.²

The time between is a messy existence where paradise and wilderness collide head on, where we are confronted with our own brokenness, our striving for wholeness and our falling back into

fractured selves. Our faith is not one of instant salvation, but a patient hopefulness in the as-yet unrevealed future splendor. In the time between, we seek out the small beauties, the bruised and damaged light that filters out of the darkness that threatens to overwhelm. To imagine the world a better place, and to hope for it, is what it means to be sanctified, to live out our holiness in response to God's love. By God's grace we become active servants of God and one another, not sitting around and waiting for that final shining magnificence, but making a home for it here, through thick and thin, through the easy life and hardship, through wholeness and brokenness, through happiness and suffering.

The risk of loving God is the pain of loving a broken humanity in the time between. Every relationship of significance, of love and devotion, carries with it the possibility of pain and heartbreak. This is true between individuals, between parent and child, between romantic partners, between friends, and it is also true of relationships between those who care for justice and those for whom justice is denied; between those who operate from a source of compassion, and those who live according to self-interest. In the time between, our relationships connect us more fully to the present and unseen Christ, but there is peril.

For Paul, for the author of John's gospel, for the entire witness of Scripture, the risk is part of an equation that ends with our reunion with God, and the revealing of the fullness of what God created and what God desires for all. The time at the end glistens in pureness and truth and peace and love, and we can dance now in exultation, or at least trusting our dance partner, through whatever this world throws at us, for we have God's love poured into our hearts, filling us up, satisfying and sustaining us. God settles in around us, in the midst of this time between, through the presence of the Holy Spirit- Holy Gatorade to restore our spiritual electrolytes, refresh and rehydrate us for the muscular work of living out the faith in the blood, sweat and tears of daily existence.

Glory be to God the Father, our divine Parent and Creator; and to the Son, Jesus the Christ, our Liberator and Redeemer; and to the Holy Spirit, our Intercessor and Companion and Advocate- that blessed Trinity presented to us as a gift to be unwrapped over and over again, rejoicing in this time between.

¹ Granger E. Westberg. *Good Grief* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 1997).

² Colum McCann. *Let the Great World Spin* (Random House: New York, 2009).