

The Church of the Good Shepherd

The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza

Good Friday – March 30, 2018

John 18:1-19:42

*Holy Spirit of God, may the refining fire of Your love reach into our hidden,
inmost places, and make us one spirit with You. Amen.*

There is an oral history project called StoryCorps, which provides Americans of all backgrounds and beliefs the opportunity to record and share the stories of their lives. Since 2004, StoryCorps has given a quarter of a million Americans the chance to record interviews about their lives, to pass wisdom from one generation to the next, and to leave a legacy for the future. It is the largest single collection of human voices ever gathered.

Last Friday morning on National Public Radio, I heard a StoryCorps interview between 10-year old Desmond Floyd, and his mother, Tanai Benard. As families around the country have been searching for answers in the wake of the Parkland, Florida, and other school shootings, this young boy and his mother sat down to talk about his experience with his first active shooter emergency drill at his public elementary school in Houston, Texas.

Allow me to share with you their conversation from the transcript.

Desmond: What emergency drills did you have as you were growing up in school?

Tanai: Fire drills and tornado drills and that was it. So can you tell me exactly what happens in active shooter drills?

Desmond: The teacher is supposed to lock the door, turn the lights off, and push this big desk behind the door. And the first time I did an active shooter drill I saw her having a hard time with it so I decided to come help her because if she doesn't get the desk on the door in time, the intruder can open it.

Tanai: So what do you do next after you push the table?

Desmond: The class is supposed to stand on the back wall but I decided to stand in front of the class because I want to take the bullet and save my friends.

Tanai: So does your teacher ask you to stand in front of the class?

Desmond: No. My life matters but, it's kind of like, there's one person that can come home to a family or there can be 22 people that come home to their family.

Tanai: Do you know why it's hard for me to accept that?

Desmond: Because I'm such a young age, I shouldn't really be giving my life up. Like, you shouldn't have to worry about that.

Tanai: Right. If there's any a time that I want you to be selfish, it's then. I need you to come home. ... So would you still stand in front of your friends even with me telling you not to?

Desmond: Yes. I get that you would want me to come home but it's really not a choice that you can make, it's a choice that I have to make.

Tanai: I see now that there's nothing I could say that would change your mind. I just hope that it never comes to that.

Desmond: Talking about this makes me feel sad. But you raised a good person.

Tanai: And this is why I can't have the conversation with you. You keep saying things like that and I'm speechless. You're 10 and you're that 10-year-old who doesn't clean their room. And there is no handbook for this. This is why the conversation always ends between you and I in dead silence. Because I'm a mother and I don't know what to say.

When I heard this dialogue, I was blown away; both by the boy's surprising maturity as well as with the open and frank discussion of decisions, fears, and feelings between this mother and child. While Desmond is quite young and is still speaking from a position of relative naïveté, there is a certain calm righteousness that comes through his responses. Desmond is not merely glorifying heroic action because he dreams to be some sort of super hero. Nor does he seem to be boasting of his imagined bravery. No, Desmond isn't seeking glory, rather he is choosing the good of others over his own.

And I think his choice of language points to something important. Desmond said that he "decided" to act. When he saw the teacher having difficulty pushing the big desk to block the door, he says he "decided" to step forward and help her. Even though the students were instructed to line up along the back wall of the classroom, Desmond says he "decided" to step forward ahead of his classmates to protect them. And then when his mother explains how she wouldn't want him to do that, he replies that he understands her wishes but that this is a "choice" that only he can make.

His were deliberate and considered choices, and his motivations seemed sourced from deeper waters than merely a drive for heroism or heat-of-the-moment reactivity. In this story, Desmond seems to understand the potential consequences (as well as anyone his age can) and it is clear that he understands his mother's wishes for him. And, yet, he says he will choose to sacrifice himself to save others, if that is what it came to. And that he will do so because, his mama "raised a good person".

At this, it is no wonder that Tanai is left with no response - no good argument – to convince his son to save himself. But this is exactly what every mother wants....it's what I want for my own child. So, Tanai is left flabbergasted and speechless. "There is no handbook for this" she exclaims, "I'm a mother and I don't know what to say." She finds herself helpless in the face of decisions made by the one she loves most.

I wonder if this was what it was like between Jesus and his mother. I wonder how many times Mary heard Jesus speak and thought "you keep saying things like that and I'm speechless." How many times did she try to convince him to step aside and let someone else be the hero; to be selfish and not only stand along the back wall with his classmates, but maybe hide behind some of them. I can almost hear Mary cry out: "I need you to come home." But then how many times did Jesus answer with calm and quiet assurance that he chooses to step forward for the sake of others and that this is a choice that only he can make.

I imagine these terrible and painful conversations she and Jesus might have had. These uneasy moments at the dinner table when he explains again and again what he feels called to do and what consequences will likely come from that. I imagine fear and desperation causing Mary's voice to rise, this conversation now an argument, as she becomes angry at this disobedient son who won't do what she wants. But then each time he tries to console her by saying, "you raised a good person."

At that, Mary sits back from the table in sorrowful silence, for there is nothing more that Mary can say. What else could Mary do but mirror Tanai's quiet prayer: "I see now that there's

nothing I can say that would change your mind. I just hope that it never comes to that.” Mary, too, is helpless in the face of decisions made by the one she loves most.

On this Good Friday, we continue our Holy Week journey and, this day, the journey takes us to the foot of the cross. Here we stand with Mary as she helplessly watches in horrified silence as her most beloved is crucified and killed. We have followed Jesus through this long journey and now we stand with Mary and watch, knowing that we, too, are helpless in the face of the decisions made by those we love most.

While this journey today does lead to death, we do not lose ourselves entirely to despair, because we know that this story does not, in fact, end here but it continues. The end is not really the end and what happens after the end is merely the beginning. I am reminded today of the preface that is prayed during the Eucharistic Prayer in our funeral service, in which we proclaim our great Christian hope: “for to thy faithful people, O Lord, life is changed, not ended.”

The journey this week has been painful but it also promises to be transformative, if only we allow God’s spirit to flow within us. The refining fire of God’s love is fearsome but it is the love that will change us in ways we never can anticipate. New life awaits, if only we are courageous enough to follow the One who always goes before us.

Amen.