

“The Blessing In The Difficult”

At Bearden Elementary many years ago, I sat in those classrooms and sized myself up. At some point it dawned on me that I was not the smartest kid in the class. I think I figured Caesar Stair, Dorothy and Caesar Stair’s oldest son, was probably the smartest. I was not second or third smartest either. When I started private school in the seventh grade, it was abundantly clear that I wasn’t any where near the smartest.

Somewhere along the road I began to feel pretty insecure about my lack of “smartness.” And, you know how insecurities can be... they grow, take on a life of their own, and can make us quite crazy at times. In response to them we grow these defense mechanisms. Out of my bad feelings, my insecurities about my lack of intelligence, I began to work very hard. I figured if I worked hard, studied really hard, then no one would ever have to find out how average I thought I was and average I was on standardized tests!

Let me stop here and say that I think work ethic is a very valuable thing. And, my willingness to work hard has awarded me many incredibly opportunities in my life. But, where it has been my short-coming, my weakness is that I have felt trapped by my insecurity. I have been unwilling to just be Caroline even if how God made me isn’t the “smartest in the class.” It has left me feeling “not good enough” at times.

So over the years I created a superwoman cape. Maybe if I wore the cape—worked hard enough, studied really hard, I could fool everyone—including myself and God.

Fast forward to Tuesday, September 18th of this year, about a month ago. I had my oral examination in front of the Board of Examining Chaplains of our diocese. In July, as some of you know, I wrote essays to complete the written portion of the examination we call canonicals. For about two years I had been dreading Tuesday, September 18th. The little girl back at Bearden Elementary was wringing her hands fearful that they may see through the cape. “What if I don’t know all the answers?” “What if they think I’m stupid?” Isn’t it amazing how our “what if”’s can be endless?

It did not go well. Certainly not as well as I hoped it would go. I choked. I didn’t know some of the answers, and then some of the answers I did know, I couldn’t recall. I broke down in tears. My biggest fear about this whole ordination process had come right before me. My hands started shaking, I could feel my pulse in my palms, and my fingers were tingling. I choked.

As I waited to hear my fate, I sat in the chapel at the Bishop's office. Tears streamed down my face. I was so embarrassed. Not only did I not know the answers, the ability to handle the situation with grace left me as well. I sat in that chapel and stared at this beautiful stained glass cross hanging in the window. There is a butterfly in the middle of the cross, and I longed to be a butterfly and fly away from the embarrassment and exhaustion I was feeling. I did not want to have to go back in there and face the examiners. I wanted to fly away.

As I sat there a strong voice came up inside me and said, "Caroline, you have been given the gift of priesthood. You just don't have all the knowledge yet. It is OK. God is in this too." It just kept repeating itself over and over again, and I kept crying and crying. My head was saying RUN and my soul was saying STAY and BE patient. In that moment I did not really want to hear what my soul was saying to me. I didn't feel much like being comforted. I wanted to get out of there!

The examiners pulled me back in to the room and informed me they were going to recommend to the bishop that I have either one year of Anglican Studies at an Episcopal Seminary or work for two years with priest mentors to help fill in the gaps in my education. More education! It makes sense, I attended a divinity school, not an Episcopal Seminary, so it makes sense that even though I took some classes at the Episcopal Seminary in Cambridge, I did not have enough.

I have had several weeks to think about this event. And, a few nights ago as I was rocking Aidan I realized the examiners gave me one of the greatest gifts I've ever received. Though they recommended more education, which I now see I clearly need to be an Episcopal priest, they also affirmed my call to the priesthood.

And, let me tell you what, I did not feel like I had given them anything to affirm that day. There was no cape, no best foot forward, no "A game," no superwoman before them. I like to think they saw through, not around, my tears, shaking hands, choking.

I hope they saw a woman who God has called to the priesthood. Not a perfect woman, not a superwoman, not even a well put together woman that day. Just a woman passionate about the Episcopal Church and its future. A woman dedicated to God, the Spirit, and Christ. A woman yearning to journey with people in their lives, helping people find God working in their lives. A woman with a heart for social justice. A woman who feels called to celebrate God in our midst—baptize babies, marry couples, celebrate the Eucharist, teach children the love of God and be taught by children the essence of that love, facilitate rich discussions, illuminate the healing power of God, and preach the good news.

After this wretched morning, I sat in my car in the parking lot right outside here and wondered how I was going to go in there and tell everyone in staff meeting that I didn't pass my exams. I wiped my eyes, came in, plopped down in a chair and just told them.

I saw the face and love of Christ in every single person in that room. I was surrounded with God's love. In addition, I have received the most loving emails and cards from parishioners who I work with. Hugs and gentle knowing looks from people. Our senior warden, Tom Ladd, dropped everything at work and dashed over to give me a hug and sit down and talk. The Bishop has met me in wonderfully pastoral and supportive ways. Father Harry gave me a wonderful book. Peg sent along a beautiful photograph and letter. Amy took me out for some soul food at my favorite restaurant Big Fatty's. And, Father Howard has called and met with me many times over the last few weeks., giving me a generous listening ear and heart, and assuring me indeed God is in this too, using this as part of my spiritual formation as a priest.

Christ, my friends, is alive and well among us. Not just soaring on eagles' wings and cheering us during this exciting time of healing, growth and renewal at Ascension. His compassion, love and mercy are being carried into the depths of peoples' hearts and souls during difficult times as well.

With a humble and full heart, with a more healed soul than before September 18th, I turn back to Christ, praising God with a loud voice, kneeling with a bowed head thanking him for healing my wounded soul. Thanking him for making himself present in powerful ways through the people of Ascension.

We all have insecurities within us. Insecurities we are afraid to show others, God, and even let ourselves see. So, we create capes, put on masks, and hide parts of ourselves believing that if they came out into the open, something bad might happen, or ultimately, God would no longer take us under His wings.

Today's Gospel reading shows us ten such people. Feeling badly about their afflictions, they approach Jesus yet keep their distance from him. They cry out to him, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" We do this too, don't we? We feel badly about what ill us, our insecurities. We build up walls that even keep God at a distance. And, at the same time, we cry out to God, "Have mercy on us." Our minds keep their distance, but our souls cry out to stay close to God and seek His comfort, His mercy.

All too often, after we pass our times of need, we forget who brought us, our souls through the difficult times. We forget that God was routing for us, cheering us on, healing us through it all, in ways we couldn't see at the time. We forget to turn back to praise God in a loud voice. We forget to kneel and bow our head in prayers of thanksgiving. We forget to surrender ourselves to God's will and mercy and allow our faith to make us well.

Let us rejoice in the good news of the day—God is powerfully in our midst—in the times of excitement, joy and celebration, and in the moments when our insecurities and afflictions get the best of us. As individuals and a congregation, may we have the courage to ask for God's mercy. May we be open to seeing Christ heal us through every experience and encounter. And, may we have the gratitude to thank God for giving us the opportunity for our faith to make us well. *Amen.*