

“Cantakerous Faith”

Rev. Brian Merritt

January 21, 2017

Jonah 3:1-5, 10 and Mark 1:14-20

I must admit that I am a bit suspicious of those who are saccharinely sweet in the church and life. The question that I am always left with is, “What are you hiding?” or “What happened in your life that was so disturbing that you have turned into this person that is sooooo nice?” Worse, I might think, “What is your con, what are you trying to get over on me?” Even though I am a people pleaser by nature, I immediately disbelieve that a person is truly nice. This is why I have always gravitated toward those who are brutally honest, sometimes rude and almost always cantankerous.

May was just such a person in my congregation in Washington D.C. This small, elderly, Japanese woman was notorious. One 20 something person in the church said that when she was a child, the children called her “the dragon lady. She is so mean!”

So, I treaded lightly.

One of my earliest interactions with May was when she saw that my arthritis had taken a turn for the worse. She claimed to have healing powers and wanted to go into the backroom and put her hands on my knee. I declined, a little worried about the proposition, but over the weeks I saw her move into that back room with men and women who had different ailments. They claimed to be healed by her touch.

Ironically, the second time I had a substantial interaction with May was when she complained to me about the passing of the peace in the church. She was adamant that touching each other was an unnecessary imposition on her personal space. I agreed touching another person should be her prerogative. From that time forward, we waved at each other during the passing of the peace and she did not move from her pew.

Abrupt seemed to be an attitude that May embraced wholeheartedly. One Sunday, as I hurried to get to the pulpit while the prelude played, May stood in my path. She looked me up and down disapprovingly and barked, “Brian!” Then she fixed my twisted stole.

Grabbing my wrist, she said, “You really should let me inspect how you dress before each service.”

“This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad.” I said seconds later.

When I began a baking group of seniors on Monday mornings called “Saints and Sinners,” May was the first person to sign up. I sighed knowing that she and the other elderly people in the kitchen’s relationship were strained and to call it testy was too much of an understatement. That first Monday was very interesting. I did much of the talking

Yet, week after week we learned new breads, started making soups and fed a lot of people. I got to know May much deeper than I had ever anticipated.

Upon a pastoral visit, I saw the signed posters from the National Ballet on her walls.

“What are these?” I asked.

She unassumingly related that she had been their seamstress for decades and had traveled with them all over the world. May laughed as she related that she was the only person whom Baryshnikov trusted with his tights.

I was a bit star struck. Who was this person? I thought I knew her, clearly I only knew her in part. May was quite a mystery. This mystery deepened when I began to ask her about her childhood. Silence often ensued. In her late 80's I had not made the connection that a Japanese woman of her age might have some deep tragedy in her background. Slowly she related the internment camps, and her bitter memories of those days. As a high school student in those camps, May endured. The experience had impoverished her parents and that her only recourse was to go to seamstress school in the camps. Soon she was so adept at sewing that May was a well-known seamstress. Somehow this had turned her toward fashion and then her time with the ballet. She related this like it was no big deal.

“May, you should write this down. There is relatively little oral history on this subject” I said as we munched on hot bread. She took my advice without much prodding and joined a writing group at the University of Maryland.

She agonized to me in private about writing about those camps. At 89, she had spent her whole life trying to forget, and now they filled her with emotions May didn't know that she had. I kept encouraging her.

For her 90th birthday she planned a gigantic party in the fellowship hall of the church. She was such a pain in the butt to everyone that my office manager and her ended up having heated words. I had to be an unlikely peacemaker.

I remember sitting on the front steps of the church sanctuary with May crying. She wanted this birthday party to be perfect.

“May, why are you putting so much pressure on yourself? You should enjoy your birthday.” I hoped that I could smooth over her hurt feelings.

“It's because of your sermons. You have talked so much about gratitude that I realized how little I had in 89 years. I wanted to make sure that when I turned 90, I let as many people know how grateful I am to them before I die. I can't tell all of those people who are dead, but I can tell the people who are alive.”

In that moment I was crying and accepting one the best compliments I have ever received as a pastor.

May was still growing, still learning, still doggedly attempting to understand her responsibility on this planet. I was, and I am still honored, to play a small role in her life and faith.

On my birthday, May insisted that she take me and my family out for lunch. It was an annual event May organized with some of the seniors in the congregation whom she could stand. This year circumstances had conspired to push it weeks after my actual birthday. Her persistence paid off. We had a wonderful time together laughing and poking fun at each other.

That was why it shocked me so much to get a call within 48 hours that May was dead. Her daughter related that she had just completed her memoir, she had taken me out to birthday lunch, gone to the doctor who related that she had cancer giving her very few days left and then May drew a bath. It was in that bath that she passed away.

Her daughter related to me, "Mom had a short list of things that she had to complete before she died. You were on that list. When that list was done, mom was done here on earth."

I have never understood why the death of a woman over 90 has had such a deep impact on me, even to this day. It shouldn't have been a surprise, but I hope that I never get so jaded that any death is not a surprise.

As soon as I read the text of Jonah being told to do what he had resisted so long, I thought of May. Jonah resisted enough to be in a storm, thrown to sea, eaten by a fish and then vomited on the shore. Finally Jonah shrugs his shoulders, knowing he has a forgiving creator and goes to preach repentance to his vile enemies. No one could resist, dig in their heels like May. Yet, no one taught me more about the redemptive nature of life. Even though our society throws away age as unproductivity, May showed me that she would never stop learning. She even believed that she could repent, change and become better well past our youth oriented culture. I hope to be as adventurous as May and I hope that I am at least half as cantankerous. Remember, we are not called to have the best manners, to be the nicest host at the party, but to be the faithful ones who follow the direction of our creator all the days of our lives.