

A Sermon by the Reverend John S. McDuffie
The Eighth Sunday After Pentecost
July 26, 2020

1 Kings 3:5-12
Psalm 128
Romans 8:26-39
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

In first lesson appointed for today, St. Paul writes, “All things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” This audacious proclamation is one of my very favorite verses in all of scripture. It is the centerpiece of a remarkable essay on faith and hope in this eighth chapter of the Letter to the Romans.

Let me take the liberty of adding two verses that were in last week’s lesson: “Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it in patience.” The apostle also tells us that the Spirit helps us in our weakness, interceding for us when we are unable to pray as we ought. And he concludes this chapter by proclaiming that nothing will separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. All of this is wonderful good news for all of us who have been baptized into Christ.

St. Paul’s writing invites us to consider who the exemplars of faith and hope are, and have been, in the Christian life for each of us. John Lewis, who died late last week, is well-known for his faith, which informed his life’s work. Presidential historian John Meacham remarked in a televised interview last Saturday morning that John Lewis was a saint, who truly believed that the Kingdom of God could break into the world at any time. Speaking on his work for civil rights, in which he risked his life over and over again, Lewis told PBS in 2004, “In my estimation, the civil rights movement was a religious phenomenon. When we’d go out to sit in or go out to march, I felt, and I really believe, that there was a force in front of us and a force behind us, ‘cause sometimes you didn’t know what to do. You didn’t know what to say, you didn’t know how you were going to make it through the day or through the night. But somehow and some way, you believed—you had faith--that it all was going to be all right.”

Those words certainly complement what St. Paul is writing about in the eighth chapter of Romans, and I invite us all to listen to the tributes and stories that will continue to emerge as we honor the life of this great American. But I would like us to spend sometime today thinking about the ordinary, less well-known people in our lives who have inspired us with the faith that all things work together for good for those who love God. I would like to tell you about one of the people in my life who was an exemplar of faith. His name is Christopher Wellman. Tomorrow, July 27, is the sixth anniversary of Chris’s death, from a massive stroke he suffered in 2014. Chris was one of my parishioners at Christ Church, Rockville, and I will never forget his friendship, his courage, and his faith.

Chris was born and spent the early years of his life in Spokane, Washington. His family moved to Dallas, Texas, in his middle school years. He was the oldest of three brothers. His father was a

very driven man who became a successful broker for one of the largest commercial real estate firms in the country, and he traveled on business all across the United States. Chris's mother was a homemaker who was also driven to see that her sons would be paragons of excellence in every way. And Chris was just that, in the first part of his life. He was handsome, athletic (as a Little League pitcher he pitched a no-hitter, and he played football in high school) and a straight A student. Chris studied at the University of Texas, and he graduated 44th in a large class of undergraduate economics majors. He was accepted for graduate studies at the London School of Economics.

All seemed to be going swimmingly well for Chris; but something was wrong. An insidious, and ultimately crippling emotional illness began to slowly overwhelm him. He had increasing episodes of acute anxiety, which drove him into social isolation. He withdrew from his acceptance to graduate school, and then spent much of his twenties working in menial jobs, and showing his parents over and over that something was terribly wrong. Finally, Chris suffered what used to be called "a complete nervous breakdown"—he became acutely psychotic, with delusional thoughts, paranoia, and terrifying anxiety. Chris's father had him admitted to a psychiatric hospital in Dallas, where doctors told Mr. Wellman after six weeks that there was little that they could do for Chris. Mr. Wellman began a nationwide search for a treatment facility that might provide help, and hope. He discovered Chestnut Lodge in Rockville, which in its day was legendary for providing care for persons who had not been successfully treated in other facilities.

Chris spent the better part of the 1980's being treated as both an inpatient, and an outpatient at Chestnut Lodge. Chris's dad told me that he spent over \$1,000,000 for Chris's care. I don't know what transpired in his treatment, as Chris struggled to regain his very soul. But I do know of two things that emerged from his therapy. One is that Chris began writing poetry. I have his collected poems. Some are murky, and overly emotionally turgid—but some are luminously beautiful.

My favorite is a poem that is simply called, "Hope." In it, the poet helps an elderly blind woman to a seat on a park bench, beneath an elm tree. They sit together in silence, until the woman remarks that she can see that the poet, is alone, and lost. "I can no longer see with my eyes, so I must see with my heart," she says. The woman goes on to tell the poet that he is only looking with his eyes upon what he has lost, traveling along a backward road of regret. "You see with your eyes", she says, "so you see always a world where there is no love, nor any purpose in what you do. If you were blind like me, you would see with your heart and you would know that there is always hope. There is always hope because there is always love." As the poet admits to his particular blindness, the woman says. "For now, you are blind. But soon you will be filled with light and love, and you too will have hope." As darkness gathers around them, the poet says that he must go, for it is getting dark. "Yes, you must go now", said the woman. "You must go and search for the light. And when you have found it, your joy will be full."

This poetic quest to see with the heart, and to search for the light, led to the second outcome of Chris's therapy—he rediscovered the religious faith of his childhood. While growing up in Spokane, Chris's father dutifully took him and his brothers to Sunday School and worship at St. James' Episcopal Church. In 1986 Chris ventured out on a weekend pass from Chestnut Lodge

to worship at Christ Church, Rockville, less than half a mile away. He sat behind a couple who turned to him at the passing of the peace with a warm greeting. “Why, you’re new here!”, the wife exclaimed. “Why don’t you come and have dinner with us?” That was the beginning of Chris’s 16-year membership at the church, until his death. Over time, his quest for the light impelled Chris to become an active member of the parish family. He became one of the Sunday counters, recording the financial collection that came in on Sunday morning. He became an usher, and joined the Altar Guild, taking care of the regular set-up of our Wednesday mid-day Eucharist. Chris joined the Pastoral Care Committee of the church. He served as a lector on Wednesdays and also at my Jazz Vespers services. He was a regular member of my Wednesday morning Bible Study group. With his gentle, humble, manner of being, Chris endeared himself to many people.

When he left Chestnut Lodge, Chris received disability benefits from the Social Security Administration. But he nevertheless found ways to be active in the community. He volunteered at the Rockville Public Library, and became the only white member of an African American book discussion group that was held there. He volunteered at the Rockville Nursing Home, visiting lonely, despondent residents and taking part in a weekly hymn-sing. He was at the center of a group of men who were residents of Rockville and former patients of Chestnut Lodge, helping to organize social gatherings and regular meals together. He invited Duncan, a chronically schizophrenic member of that group, to come to Christ Church. Duncan became much loved and accepted by those who knew him, and the three of us would go together to several minor league baseball games each summer. Some of my fondest memories of my parish ministry are about the times we shared at those games.

All was not light and easy for Chris, however. He continued with a regular regimen of medication and supportive therapy to the end of his earthly life. In 2002 while engaged to be married, he suffered the loss of his fiancé to a freak accident she suffered in her home. Although Chris rarely spoke of her death, it was clear to me that his inner heartbreak and loneliness after that tragedy accompanied him always. Around 2008 Chris developed a habit of writing letters to me—almost one per week. I managed to save most of them, and they provide a chronicle of a soul’s journey in faith. There were cycles of despair, anticipative joy, anger with the world and with God, crippling anxiety that necessitated his withdrawal from the church he loved for periods of time, intense loneliness, but also regenerative hope.

Chris never gave up. Eight months before his death, I had the honor of presenting Chris at the Washington Cathedral for his public reaffirmation of his baptismal vows. He had told me weeks before that he thought God was calling him to begin a new journey in his life. I remember his joy at that service, as we sang together a hymn that begins, “Will you come and follow me, if I but call your name? Will you go where you don’t know, and never be the same?” A month after that service, in the middle of Advent, Chris wrote me a letter. He had been awake in the morning, before the sunrise, and had seen a bright morning star in the sky outside his apartment window. He thought about wishing upon a star. What should he wish for? Would it be fame, or riches? Would it be the love of a beautiful woman? No, Chris wrote. His wish would be simply to follow Jesus.

We read today's epistle at Chris's funeral. He was interred in the columbarium outside the chapel door of the church. One day I will be interred next to him. "We are all a part of a vast tapestry that God has woven", Chris told me in another letter.

"All things work together for good for those who love God," writes Paul. I think of Chris often when I look out on the physical, social, and political realm around us in the present. Perhaps you can call to mind the people of faith who have inspired you in special ways. These are anxious times, with no easy answers. It is tempting to look around at what's going on with eyes that see only bleakness and hopelessness, and loss. But we need to learn to see with the heart—to know that the Spirit is behind us and in front of us and is interceding for us with sighs too deep for words—and to look for the light, and to know in the deepest reservoir of our faith, that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

I close today by saying that this is my last Sunday with you as the part-time interim assistant to the rector. My appointment ends at the close of July; and in August you will welcome a talented and gifted new addition to your clergy staff—the Rev. Andrew Kryzak. I'll have more to say about my time at Christ Church in a little note that will appear in the coming weekly parish email on Wednesday. Please look for it! But for now, let me say that it has been an honor and a joy for me to be among you in this special place. When things get "back to normal", you'll see me from time to time in the pews worshipping with you—and from time to time I may even preach again! I close with my favorite blessing, which is that appointed for Trinity Sunday:

*The Lord bless you and keep you.
The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious unto you.
The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.
The Lord God almighty, Holy and undivided Trinity,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
Guard you, save you
And bring you to the city of light where he lives and reigns forever.
Amen.*