

Canterbury Sunday
February 12, 2012
Celebrating Charles Freer Andrews
The Rev. Jeanne Handsknecht

Deuteronomy 15:7-11
Psalm 113:2-8
Matthew 23:8-12

You may have noticed that things are a little different this morning. The bulletin is different. The readings are different. The prayers are different. The music is different. And curiously, I am not Reid Hamilton, chaplain of Canterbury House. Reid was called out of state to officiate at a funeral of a close family friend and regrets that he can not be with us today. He is there knowing that our thoughts and prayers are with him in his travels and his grief. I speak now with his blessing and to share with you, not a sermon but a testimonial of the anointing I received when I worked with Reid and the students at Canterbury House as their seminary intern.

The Episcopal Center at the University of Michigan, or Canterbury House, is a mission church for university students and employees, a ministry which was born out of St. Andrew's and we still maintain a close relationship. Now a ministry designed especially to nurture a population in transition on a lot of different levels (educationally, emotionally, physically, geographically) has to be creative in its programming. One example of this can be found in the liturgy. The academic calendar is often not well timed with the liturgical calendar so rather than having some disjointed readings about Jesus doing some random things and perhaps missing the build-up to Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost or even the big events themselves, Canterbury House has set out to be intentionally, thoughtfully disjointed by celebrating the feasts of the saints. That's why we are celebrating the feast of Charles Freer Andrews today instead of the 6th Sunday of Epiphany. And what makes this work week after week, is the binding theology of the Resurrection and the life eternal of that great cloud of witnesses. We are forever connected to those who have gone before us, and therefore we, as one voice, can sing praises to God along with the angels and archangels on Sundays or whenever two or three are gathered in Christ's name. It is a beautiful reminder that we are not alone and not even time and space can separate us from the ones we love.

Who needs to hear that more than college students who may be away from home for the first time? Who needs this more than those questioning their place in the world or those feeling very far away from ideas, beliefs, and values that they once thought they understood but are now questioning? How the saints help respond to this and what I love the most about them, is that saints are not perfect, they simply persevere in their imperfection and show us how we can live fully into the person we were created to be. The gift of the saints to all of us is a gift of partnership: shared experiences, shared work, shared prayer, and shared joy. We are not only not alone but the saints are on our side-- ready with intercessions and, I believe, divine interventions! This is good news! And news I desperately needed to hear, even as an established adult, one with four kids and working on a second career.

Canterbury House was indeed very important in my formation as a priest. I remember fussing around the altar doing the work of a sacristan and I asked Reid to remind me which candle gets lit first—the right or the left as you face the altar? And he laughed and handed me a bunch of liturgical resources and told me to look it up. But he did so with this reassurance, “You know, you can't ruin God.” I am pretty sure I cried tears of relief that day.

I discovered my theological bent while I was at Canterbury House and it was nurtured and reinforced there in surprising and wonderful ways. Many of you have heard me tell this story before and I don't care. It's a good story and I hope to tell it many more times after this! You've been warned! So anyway, I was still in seminary and my Systematic Theology class required that I research a theologian from my tradition. I toyed a bit with choosing one of the Caroline Divines, and if you are wondering who they are, then you understand why I didn't pick them. I thought about Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury but he's kind of a boring read. Then Reid suggested that I take a look at Desmond Tutu which I did mostly because I thought I already knew a lot

about him. I of course did not. I was immediately drawn to his Ubuntu Theology: the image of God as creator and that all of creation is a divine act of love and how we are called into partnership with God and one another. And Tutu had my attention with that but when I learned how he fervently proclaimed this theology and boldly live into it, well I was completely smitten—head over heels style. This understanding of God was something that I had always felt but never knew how to express and I could not get enough of it. I read nearly everything by Bishop Tutu as well as everything about him. The joke around the house and at seminary was that he was my new boyfriend! (I wish!) For the entire term I analyzed his sermons and speeches. If you don't think that Desmond Tutu has greatly influenced how I understand the Scripture and the content of my preaching, you have not been paying attention these last two years! Ubuntu is my only message.

I left Canterbury House in June of 2008 and moved into other internships. That Fall, so just after I left, Desmond Tutu came to the University of Michigan to receive the Wallenberg Humanitarian Award but more importantly, to me, he was to have dinner at Canterbury House. So I called up Reid and said, "How can I help?" meaning, "How can I meet my hero, this huge influence on my ministry?" And I pretty much got brushed off, something about 200 other people asking him the same question. So I had to be stern about it, and I said, "Look Reid, you can give me something productive to do so I am in the same room with the man, or I will show up *I Love Lucy* style and meet him that way." You all remember *I Love Lucy* right? Lucy was always trying these outrageous schemes to get on her husband's variety show, and it never ended well. But it did for me! I am proud to say that I served Desmond Tutu pasta and he kissed me! (My family would like you to know that he kissed all of the Canterburians that evening, but whatever.) It was life changing. At Canterbury House you remember to appreciate what every child knows: not all saints are dead. Pay attention to the ones walking among us.

It was at Canterbury House that I claimed my prophetic voice. Preaching is a daunting responsibility and over the course of my internship I learned to keep the reverence of that tension without succumbing to the fear it can create so that the Holy Spirit is free to do her work. My very first preaching assignment I think borders on seminarian abuse, because it was extremely public—it was on the Diag. It was the Feast of St. Francis and three other campus ministers, a handful of students, half a dozen canines, a cat or two, the band, passersby, and I all converged smack in the middle of campus to bless the hell out of our pets. And I got to give the sermon. Lucky, lucky me. I guess if you can figure out what your goofy Labrador will sit through, you can successfully preach anywhere! I'll let you be the judge of that. The students certainly were. Because my internship was part of my seminary field education I was constantly being evaluated. I was doing this for a grade. After the services when I was the preacher, I'd pass out these little sheets that the seminary required and the students, being students, diligently filled them out for me. I made the comment once as I was scanning over the forms, "No one has anything critical to say. Why is that I wonder?" And one of the band members answered me, "We're all about the affirmation here, Jeanne. All about the affirmation."

And that brings me full circle; imagine a place that exists to affirm. I would like to say that place is the Church universal, but we all know that isn't true. And our young adults have learned that lesson the hard way, maybe you have too. So in a world that is highly competitive and where the eyes scrutinize, the minds judge, and the tongues condemn, in that world, I rejoice for the few places that are tolerant. But being tolerant is such a low standard to live by because it keeps people at a distance when we were created for community. So imagine a place that raises the bar and says you are not alone, we are rooting for you! You and I were created as an act of love by the same God who is still doing great things in the world and needs our help. And you don't need to be perfect because you can't ruin God. Imagine that place! Don't you yearn for that, for yourself, for your children, your grandchildren for the world? I am here to testify, to bear witness, that this place has existed for me at Canterbury House, and you, dear friends, are reaping the fruits of that encounter. Thanks be to God.

The Reverend Jeanne Hansknecht
St. Andrew's Ann Arbor, MI