

## PENTECOST XVII

*Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day.* Romans 13:12

Last weekend Sam and I met up with some dear old friends and went cruising. Sue and John became friends when I was first ordained and serving in Dover, and we have stayed in touch over the years, although they now live in Vermont and we don't see them as often as we'd like. But whenever we do meet it's time for lengthy, intense, philosophical and ethical discussions between Sue and me – we have stored up all manner of topics and questions to talk about together.

Last weekend, we'd been on the boat about five minutes when Sue asked, "how do you get over things?" She didn't mean *me*, she meant *one*. How *does* one get over things? I understood what she meant: *how do we forgive? How do we get beyond hurt and anger? How do we move on? Is it possible to do as Jesus proscribes—forgive not just once or seven times, but seventy times seven? How do we love our enemies? How do we, as Paul tells us today, put on the armor of light?*

Sue's question felt especially timely to me because of what I have been thinking about myself, a great deal, these last weeks. Earlier in the summer my friend and neighbor Carolyn said, "you know, you hardly ever talk about the fact that your grandmother was murdered. I think I talk about it more than you do." I thought about this. "Well," I said, "I guess I've moved on."

But her question, or something, started me on a train of thought. My grandmother was indeed murdered, by burglars, 32 years ago this October, a few days before her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, in her bed in her house just three miles down the road from where I grew up and where my parents still lived. I was named for my grandmother and we were always very close, and I was devastated, as was our whole family and the whole community, when she was killed. And early October is always a slightly spooky time for me, combining as it does my daughter's birthday and my grandmother's death.

As I moved into vacation mode I began to think about a new poetry project – writing a series of poems about Granny, about her life, her death, the men who killed her, and the trial, which I attended in 1977 with my mother and our priest. This was the first of August – I say the date because it proved to be strangely meaningful.

One of my colleagues was visiting for the weekend, a priest who had a prison ministry years ago, and I talked to her about my idea. She proposed immediately that I

should find out what had happened to Granny's killer – where was he in prison, what had his life been like in prison, and so forth. *Maybe I'd like to be in touch with him? Maybe we could have a reconciliation? Remember Dead Man Walking?* And so forth.

I said that I was not at all sure this was the direction I wanted to go in. What I had in mind was a project of the imagination, not a radical challenge to my courage and capacity to forgive. Nonetheless, another friend was visiting who does research for a living. I gave her Granny's name and dates, the name of her killer and the date of the trial, and asked her to find out what she could.

Within a day she had discovered that my grandmother's murderer had been released from prison on July 28, just three days before I began to envision my project. Truly, I don't know what to make of that proximity of timing. I'm not a mystical person, I'm not psychic – but somehow, I have to think, something extraordinary happened. I believe I have a better understanding of what the psychologist Jung called the collective unconscious – some awareness that transcends the individual mind and soul.

In any event, the killer is out of prison. Maine does not have a parole system, so he is really out and about, with no requirement that he report even so much as his address.

So I am free of any obligation, or any opportunity, to make contact with him. I don't have to wrestle with all the emotional and ethical questions my friend raised for me in suggesting that I find out about him. I have talked to two victims' advocates in the Maine justice system, both of whom have been most friendly and helpful. Both claim that they tried to locate family members to tell us that the man was about to be released. That makes me wonder about their efficiency, since my mother, Granny's only child, and three of my siblings live in Maine. Nonetheless, they are going to provide me with whatever documentation they can, by statute, about the trial and the careers of the perpetrators.

Now, all this may sound as if I was truly misguided when I claimed, earlier in the summer, to have moved on. But I think, actually, that my deciding to go back and explore this traumatic event now, decades later, means that in some profound way I have moved on. It took me over 30 years to write and publish a book of poems about my disastrous marriage to my daughter's father. Sometimes we try to fathom and memorialize pain in the moment, sometime we have to bide our time. As the philosopher Pascal wisely said, "the heart has reasons that reason knows not of."

Part of what helped me to move on after Granny's death was something that happened – that I made happen, at the trial of the perpetrators. Because I had a goal then, and I knew it.

On the first day of the trial I felt the killer's eyes on me, a creepy, predatory, sexual stare. *Who was this young woman, and why was she here?* he may have thought.

When the court recessed, he was led out, in handcuffs, to a small room at the end of the hall where he sat and smoked a cigarette. I stood in the hall and stared at him. At first, he stared back. *Was I flirting with him?* he may have wondered. He was not bad looking. He had killed my grandmother.

I didn't smile, I didn't blink, I didn't flinch. Perhaps he detected a family resemblance. Soon, he would look away. This went on, recess after recess. After a few repetitions, he began to look down, to look away from my stare. to snatch glance only.

Before many more breaks, he asked the guards to shut the door to his closet, close him in, away from my gaze. I had stared him down. I had won.

Well, *who* was victorious? *Death has been swallowed up in victory*, writes Paul in his first letter to the church at Corinth, Chapter 15. But the victory that swallowed up my grandmother's death was not simply winning my small, personal staring contest with Leon Rich.

At Granny's funeral months earlier, the priest, Steven Foote, said in his homily, *We must not let our lives be diminished by fear or tragic loss*. And that was my goal then, I knew it. As we were planning the funeral

I asked that Herbert's poem, "Love III," be included in the service. "Gee," said Steve Foote, looking at the seventeenth century language and spelling, "I'll need to learn how to read that."

"I'll read it," I volunteered. This would be the first time I'd read in front of a congregation since I'd been the narrator of the Christmas Pageant when I was sixteen.

And then my two sisters said they would like to read Scripture passages.

We didn't say it aloud, but we knew we were making a statement – a statement to a shocked and apprehensive community: *We must not let our lives be diminished by fear or tragic loss*.

Nancy Holt's three granddaughters wore bright colored flowered dresses at her funeral service. We all stood up in front of the overflowing congregation at St. Mary's and declared our faith in God's grace and loving-kindness in the face of human evil. That, surely, was a victory.

And that was the victory I felt I won at the trial, in facing down my grandmother's killer. I did not want to become afraid, and I think I achieved that. And I believe that conquering that fear then, the fear of a man who had randomly and purposelessly taken the life of my beloved grandmother, has served me well.

Because I believe that fear can become a major obstacle to moving on, to moving beyond, whatever or whomever has hurt or angered or deprived us. Fear is often a major barrier to forgiveness. Fear is a major impediment to *putting on the armor of light, and living honorably in the day*. Most of all, fear is the enemy of freedom – emotional freedom, spiritual freedom.

*Perfect love casts out fear*, Paul tells us, and from that I have to believe that he saw fear as, perhaps, the heart of darkness, the Adversary.

My grandmother's murderer is now free, physically, from his more than thirty years of incarceration. Jesus tells the disciples at the end of today's gospel, *Whatever you bind on earth will bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven*. I don't know whether that man has been loosed from the weight of his crime. I can find it in myself to pray that he has been, if that will enable him to move on and live a productive life. Is that compassion? Is that forgiveness? I'm not sure I can claim either in this case.

But it does feel like freedom, and like the closest I can imagine to love of one's enemy.

Amen.