

September 29, 2019
The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost—Proper 21—
and Celebration of the Life of Dr. E. Dorothy Asch
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15
Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16
1 Timothy 6:6-19
Luke 16: 19-31

Today we are celebrating both a regular Sunday liturgy as well as the life of our friend, Dr. E. Dorothy Asch. In the Episcopal tradition, the preacher is supposed to preach a homily and not a eulogy for a funeral. I wrote one of each with the intention of sharing the eulogy/remembrance/biography at the reception. Just before the service began, I decided to share both during worship.

Eulogy

Dr. E. Dorothy Asch grew up on Long Island Sound, which is perhaps why she had a lifelong love for the ocean and began sailing as a girl. Raised in a secular home, it was with a childhood friend that she first attended church, and she never stopped going. Dorothy graduated from high school but, lacking any family encouragement, wasn't even considering college. But a friend encouraged her to apply to Adelphi University, then a school for women. So she went to the admissions office and was admitted on the spot, just a couple of days before classes started. She went on to earn a BA in psychology.

By then, World War II was in progress, so Dorothy joined the Navy. After the war, she earned a divinity degree from Garrett Theological Seminary and then a PhD in theology from the University of Edinburgh. That was in 1951. After graduation, she worked for the World Council of Churches in Switzerland, helping to organize its second international assembly, which took place in 1954 in Evanston, Illinois. In that position she worked with some of the most important early leaders of the ecumenical movement, who, in the aftermath of world war, saw ecumenism as the means to counter aggressive nationalism. Afterwards, she moved to the Midwest, where she worked for congregations and taught religious studies at both the high school and college levels.

Dorothy came to St. Thomas's, New Haven, about 60 years ago, to serve as the Church's director of Christian education. Part of her job was to oversee its Day School, then a nursery school, and she became its Jane-of-all-trades. In that capacity she is now credited as co-founder of the Day School, because it was under her leadership that the school grew into a full elementary school. Eventually she left St. Thomas's for several years, during which she started another small private school, which alas did not enjoy the success of St. Thomas's. She returned to the church early in Michael Ray's rectorship, and has been volunteering here ever since. She served as preacher, pastoral visitor, liturgist, and more. Her particular passion was liturgy, and like all liturgists, she was very opinionated about it. She traveled around the diocese training volunteers from other churches. She made these vestments. As she aged, she gradually pared back her duties.

Dorothy often underplayed her own accomplishments. I asked Dorothy a few years ago whether she was the first woman to earn a PhD in Theology from the University of Edinburgh. She said it had never occurred to her to ask. So I emailed the University of Edinburgh and learned that she was actually the second. Just a couple of weeks ago, I again expressed amazement that she had accomplished such a thing. She said she always just assumed that they gave it to her because they felt sorry for her. I argued that it was probably just the opposite: that in 1950 she would have had to be even more talented than the men. I could see her pondering that, but I don't know whether she changed her mind.

It wasn't that many years ago that Dorothy finally gave up her house in Whitneyville and moved into Dunbar Davenport senior housing. She never stopped missing her flower gardens or especially her two dogs. But even with her limited mobility she continued to take joy from a deep blue sky. She always appreciated the power of laughter. And she remained loyal to St. Thomas's Church. Until her fall last May, Dorothy was working in the Church office two mornings a week, scheduling Sunday servers, and serving every Sunday. Even after that, from her shared room at Whitney Manor, she was still serving as my liturgy and church life and overall life consultant. The last year was a tough one for me, and she was a never-flagging voice of encouragement and support.

Dorothy and I frequently laughed about being peas in a pod—we agreed on almost everything having to do with liturgy in specific and church life in general. Though we never said it out loud, I expect that we laughed while knowing full well that we shared traits both positive and not-so-positive. As is sometimes the case, in her drive to make everything right, Dorothy was hard on herself, and therefore hard on others. She could be tough to a fault, sometimes forgetting that the church is always more about people than tasks.

Still, Dorothy was an amazing person. She was a woman well before her time, accomplishing so much with so little support. Dorothy was book smart and people smart; she was generous and funny and dependable and loyal and independent. She gave much, in exchange for little. She was not a Pollyanna, but she believed in doing what needed to be done. She never flagged in her faith and trust in God, or her commitment to St. Thomas's Church and Day School, where she touched so many people, including three generations of children, and through whom she has indirectly touched countless others.

Homily

Today we're having a dual-purpose worship service here at St. Thomas's. On one hand, this is a regular Sunday. Therefore, our opening prayer and readings are those the church calendar assigned for today. On the other hand, we have a burial. For that, it just so happens that the assigned opening prayer and readings are quite fitting. Dorothy would have gotten a big kick out of that coincidence. Let me reread some snippets:

- From the opening collect: "... Grant us the fullness of your grace, that we, running to obtain your promises, may become partakers of your heavenly treasure..."¹
- From the psalm: Put not your trust in rulers, nor in any child of earth, / for there is no help in them. / When they breathe their last, they return to earth, / and in that day their thoughts perish.²
- From the second lesson: "There is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it ..." ³
- And from the Gospel: "... remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony." ⁴

Our culture is notoriously death-denying. Despite this, there are times in life when our human pondering can't help but turn to the weighing of the transient and the eternal. During autumn, as the leaves orange and the air chills, our thoughts turn to the impending winter around us and the eventual winter of our own lives. In the aftermath of a death, we review and assess our relationship with that person, our relationships with others, our relationship with God, and the time remaining until our own death.

The parable in today's Gospel reading from Luke criticizes the excesses of worldly wealth while expressing dire concern for the poor. In doing so, it relates behavior in this life to conditions in the afterlife, warning the wealthy, "Do right, or else." Ironically, the parable also observes that such a warning is pointless, because the wealthy won't listen anyway. Apparently "Do right, or else" didn't work back then. This makes sense to me, because I don't think it works right now. In fact, many of us have run away from that very sort of understanding of God.

Most of us are on the comparatively wealthy side of the economic spectrum. And so we need to take seriously this parable's message about sharing. I don't mean to underplay that. Our society is shameful and sinful in its lack of willingness to turn its copious resources toward eliminating poverty. And yet I still don't think the message for us is "Do right, or else." As I see it, through Jesus, God has taken care of eternal salvation. No one is beyond God's reconciling reach. That's true for everyone, even those who have ignored the poor. But this knowledge isn't the license to be a narcissistic jerk. Instead, it might be the key to freedom, freedom from the endless striving that so often fills our lives, while so seldom yielding true rewards. It is the liberating invitation and confidence to live *as-if*: to live as if the kingdom of God *has* drawn near. It is by living *as-if* that we experience God right here and right now. It is by living *as-if* that we embody God right here and right now.

The Gospel of Luke consistently asserts that a great overturning of the social order *is* underway: the rich will be poor, and the poor will be rich; the first will be last, and the last will be first. Jesus found a brave and hardy few who would dare to follow him in living this truth. They weren't the people anyone else would have chosen, but they did it. Those few found others who found others who found yet others, and so forth and so on. Leap ahead a couple of thousand years, and here we are today. Passing the gesture from generation to generation, Jesus is tapping us on the shoulder.

Jesus may warn about the next life, but his primary concern is for this one—not for its potential to yield reward or punishment in the next life, but rather for its value here and now. That's where our concern should lie, too. It's not about looking out for ourselves. Instead, it's about relationship. Through Jesus, God invites us into relationship, relationship of the most outrageous kind, relationship right here and right now. The kingdom party is on, and we're invited. It is by living *as-if* that we make the most of the time remaining until our own death.

And so I will share a song lyric from folk singer Ani Di Franco. She happens to be an atheist, but I suppose even an atheist can be a prophet. Many times over the years I have returned to this line of hers: "You've got your whole life to do something / and that's not very long."⁵

That being said, some lives are longer than others. Today we celebrate and give thanks to God for a marathon of a life, that of Dr. E. Dorothy Asch.

I know that I am not the only person here who was completely shocked by Dorothy's death last week. This makes absolutely no sense. After all, Dorothy was nearly 98 years old. It's not like she was going to live forever. But if there was anyone who could pull it off, it would have been Dorothy.

Observing the burial rites within regular Sunday worship is not often done. But it's appropriate: as our tradition baptizes within the principal worship of the gathered body of Christ, so today we bury. And it's especially appropriate for someone like Dorothy, who lived most of her long and productive life in service to the church.

I should note another interesting coincidence for today. We just heard part of the First Letter to Timothy, which also includes this scriptural lump of coal: “Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent.”⁶ That makes me want to laugh *and* cry. Those two simple verses were long used as an excuse to exclude women from church leadership. I think Dorothy always felt the effect.

The women here know how difficult life can be in *today's* world; just imagine what Dorothy faced. Still, always, Dorothy lived *as-if*. Following the way God set in front of her, perhaps not even noticing that she was doing anything unusual, she forged her own path and accomplished so much. Of necessity, Dorothy was a trailblazer, forging the way for women leaders in the church, but she didn't think of herself that way. As is so often true for women even today, Dorothy tended to undervalue her own achievements and to underplay her own courage.

At nearly 98 years old, Dorothy still carried the wounds of her childhood. My experience with other elderly people has shown me that those wounds never go away. But Dorothy didn't talk much about that, and so neither will I. I will say that she found refuge in her faith, and her faith never failed her. She loved the Church, which didn't always do well by her, but she never gave up. Dorothy gave her life to the church, and she served here at St. Thomas's right up until the end.

There is so very much more I could say about Dorothy. But the sermon at an Episcopal funeral is supposed to be a sermon and not a eulogy. And so I'll get back to the Gospel here, and do some eulogizing at the reception. I will say that Dorothy was an amazing person whose journey I was privileged to share for a short time. Dorothy wasn't perfect. But God doesn't expect perfection. God just hopes we will show up. God will take care of the rest.

The burial liturgy is an Easter liturgy. We proclaim that Christ is risen, and that his victory over the grave will bring us all to life eternal. May we all be liberated by that good news. Today we celebrate Dorothy and with confidence formally commend her to God. An unlikely prospect, a woman before her time, Dorothy lived *as-if*, manifesting the kingdom of God and thereby helping to midwife it into being. May her life be an example for us and a reminder, that we too can live *as-if*, that we too are called to be—that we too *can* be—midwives to the fully reconciled and realized kingdom of God.

Notes

¹ Collect for Proper 21, *The 1979 Book of Common Prayer*, 234.

² Psalm 146:2-3, *The 1979 Book of Common Prayer*, 803.

³ 1 Timothy 6:6-7, NRSV.

⁴ Luke 16:25, NRSV.

⁵ From the song “Willing to Fight” by Ani DiFranco.

⁶ 1 Timothy 2:11-12, NRSV.