

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
The Reverend Barbara A. Hutchinson  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Lent Year C

My sister and I often found ourselves sitting and sipping sweet tea from my mother's best china tea cups, in the living room of her apartment in a retirement center, the summer after our father died. I was home on break between my 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year of seminary and my sister had moved back into the area two years before.

As so often happens when one parents dies, there's a natural and holy tendency to gather as a family more often, to surround the remaining parent with extra love and attention, to assist in the ushering in of a new age, a new dynamic within the family. Being together often helped us ease the pain of walking into that apartment and feeling the absence of someone who shaped our lives. We filled the emptiness in our hearts with stories from the past. At times we laughed until we cried, and other times we just started out crying.

But this time was different. We began our afternoon together by sipping tea from my mother's best china teacups, being soaked by the afternoon sun as it slanted in over the African violets on the windowsill, because there was a specific purpose to our visit.

My mother had asked us over to divide up or at least claim many of her possessions. It was time for her to see her daughters take and cherish items that, to her, represented parts of the life we had shared.

With each item we picked up, our hearts already knew the story attached to it, and we felt joy. Of course, I wanted my grandmother's hope chest and the delicate and fragile linens it contained. Each day now when I wake in the morning and see it under the window in our bedroom, I feel a thread of connection to the grandmother, and the day starts out right. Of course, I wanted the photographs, or the books which we all knew by heart; of course, I wanted my great-grandmother's china, or the silver balls, filled with potpourri, which we hung each Christmas from our dining room chandelier. My sister and I chose the items that were right for us, and it was a gracious and happy time of valuing and carrying forward the life we had shared with our parents.

And then we began to hit the hard part. It wasn't my sister and I arguing about which items we should take. It was when my mother offered us items we didn't want. That cabinet with a fabulous collection of cut glass pieces just didn't mean anything to me. Neither I couldn't imagine it fitting into my NY apartment, nor, frankly, did I want it. My mother half-heartedly understood our space constraints and we moved on to other safer items: tablecloths, paintings, and books.

But then we hit the one thing we really got stuck on. My mother was a collector of Royal Doulton toby mugs. I don't remember how or why she was

interested in collecting them, but she was. What I do remember was her delight when she eagerly opened her Christmas present knowing a chosen one was inside. She proudly displayed them in a built-in bookcase my father had fashioned for this particular purpose.

My mother could tell instantly by our expressions that neither Janet nor I had any interest in having them as our own. Maybe by then we were so emotionally exhausted by sorting through the pieces of lives, that, foolishly, we didn't even take a single one to honor my mother's love of them. She knew it and we could see her heart sink.

My sister and I had made a mistake by caring more about what worked in our lives at the moment instead of imagining that our rejection of these mugs could be hurtful to our mother, her equating our rejection of the mugs with our rejection of her or of the life she valued.

My mother had made a mistake many of us do by seeing her own worth through the things she loved, the things she accumulated, or the things she had done. We naturally seem to attach a piece of our identity to the fruit we have borne into the world, and, thereby, wonder if we, the tree, have any inherent value other than what we have given birth to or attached our love to.

By not valuing what my mother had, I'm afraid, Janet and I said to her that we didn't value her or how she had chosen to live her life. Of course that wasn't true, but our rejection of what she had accumulated in life, of what she had attached value to, of what she treasured, made her wonder, I fear, did we value her?

In our gospel story today, in my mother's mind, I fear, she would have imagined herself a well-weathered fig tree which bore fruit lavishly and with effort, but whose fruit was no longer collected, but was allowed to fall to the ground and perish which no one treasured enough to pick and make into delicious jam.

Our gospel story speaks to us of an urgency to bear fruit into the world, to bear God's being and love into the world by what we do, by what we treasure, and by what we give to others. It is clear that this is our purpose as human beings. We are called to bear fruit today, not wait until a more convenient time in our lives, but do it today. We are called to open ourselves to Jesus' care and immerse ourselves in the scriptures, to nourish ourselves with a new prayer practice, to drink deeply from the well by completely handing our lives over to Jesus. It is good that we pay attention to Jesus' urgent message that if we don't bear fruit, we will be cut down.

This is why we are dedicated to doing mission and ministry here at St. Andrew's, why now is the time to serve meals to the hungry, to visit the sick, to help those in prison, to offer the children in the neighborhood the school supplies they need in the fall and the lunches they need in the summer, to help the residents of the Episcopal Home live the vital lives offered to them through the care they receive,

and to bring our healing presence into our neighborhoods. I love it that we are bearing much fruit into the world. It is what we are called to do, and we do it well.

However, an equally strong message we find in our gospel story today, and which spoke clearly to me, goes back to the story I told you about my mother's toby mugs. Our gospel story contains an invitation to trust that, when we do bear fruit into the kingdom, when we do treasure what we have found to bring us joy, when we have met the needs of others, even if others don't carry it forward, or value it as we do or did, we can trust that God does. When we live into the mission of God, and tirelessly give of ourselves in creating, a family, a ministry, a sense of hope within a community, we take our best step forward, and leave the rest with God.

As far as I know, neither Janet nor I have any of our mother's Toby mugs. We packed up her belongings so quickly after her death I have no idea what happened to them. But I learned something from my rejection of them, that sunlit afternoon in her family room, which God and I carry forward. God took that pain in my heart and made something good from it: compassion. What joy it is that we can always trust God to carry the good parts forward.

We always want what we treasure to be treasured by others. And sometimes it's not. Programs come and go in a parish. Passions blossom and fade away. Ministries emerge, touch lives, and then disappear, and somehow it's all part of God's plan.

It was poignant to me that, as I was reflecting upon my mother's toby mugs, I saw the news story that St. James, Lancaster, the parish which raised me up as a priest, has decided to stop its flagship ministry this summer, the Anchorage Program which has fed hundreds and thousands of people over the past 30 years. At first I was horrified. In my mind I had taken a piece of the truth and identity of the parish I love and attached it to the faces of the hungry, and if those faces are no longer there, then somehow the truth and identity of the parish would also be gone. How foolish that would have been to stay in that spiritual spot! Of course God is so much bigger than anything we do. I must trust God will take the best parts of the care and compassion of the people at St. James and make something marvelous with it. And other churches will step up and care for the hungry, perhaps in new ways, but God's mission will remain God's mission.

Today, we are called to bear fruit for the kingdom, for the time we have before us, to make a difference in the world, to do it now, to do it with love, and then let it go into the hands of a God we trust to take the good parts of what we do and to carry them forward, in the presence of the Holy Spirit, to create something beyond our imagination, which we are invited into.

As we live within the changes and chances of our lives, in our personal transitions, and in our common life here at St. Andrew's, it is exciting to know that

the working out of God's kingdom is not ours to figure out, but to embrace, for we are in relationship with a God who cherishes the fruit we bear.