

Christ Church Valdosta, GA
 Lent 3B, March 7, 2021
 The Rev. Dr. James C. Pace

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Over the years listening to what Jesus says and observing what he does, I can truly say that I admire his courage to stand up for what he knew was right and no matter who he had to stand up to. He refused to let the status quo ever go unchecked. He was brazen and what he said was many times absolutely shocking. As I reflected on these characteristics after reading this Sunday's Gospel, please allow me to tell you the story of two other people who have my deepest respect for the same reasons.

Almost one year ago, one of my all-time Episcopal Church s/heroes died. She is perhaps best known as the church's first female Bishop, The Right Reverend Barbara Clementine Harris. Born in 1930, ordained a priest in 1980 and elected suffragan bishop of the Diocese of Massachusetts in 1989.

She was the first woman as well as the first black woman to be elevated to the episcopate. In 1974, when the so-called Philadelphia 11 women were ordained in the Episcopal Church, Harris was then Senior Warden of the Episcopal Church of the Advocate in Philadelphia and served as crucifer. At that time, the ordinations of the 11 women were termed irregular and invalid. The Episcopal Church cleared the way for the regular ordination of women two years later. Prior to the ordinations of the eleven, Harris, then Senior Warden of the Advocate, called the vestry and they composed and issued the following mission statement: "The goals of the Advocate have always been to move towards one world, one people, and one love concept. We are **not afraid** to take any step or measure that will make the concept a reality." We are not afraid!

Harris was perhaps best known for her columns in the Episcopal Church Publishing Company's publication entitled *The Witness*. In her regular column, she took on such issues as the bombers who targeted abortion clinics, discussed the politics of AIDS and its horrible effects of homophobia, alienation, and hatred. She was not afraid to discuss sexism, systemic racism and the controversial issues that impacted the dignity of every human being.

After a person is elected bishop in a local diocese, the person must then be confirmed by more than half of the nation's other bishops before being eligible for consecration. As soon as Harris was nominated, traditionalists and opponents launched smear campaigns to discredit her. They attacked her non-traditional education and personal life...she had been divorced after a short marriage. Though the issue of her race was never specifically raised, it was there. But it was her liberal social views that were the greatest source of controversy. In her biography, she states: "It is not easy hearing nasty things said about you; to receive death threats from people you don't even know. Nobody can hate like Christians." The Boston police asked her if she wanted to wear a bullet proof vest on the day of her consecration due to the threats to her life. She said: "No. A bullet proof vest is heavy ... I weigh only 103 lbs.; if I fall over at the altar, I won't be able to get up!" And then she added: "If some fool wants to shoot me, what better place to die than at an altar!" Women, still banned from ordination in their own denominations or dioceses, were there in force to celebrate with her. From videotapes of the service, I and remember male priest after male priest stating their objections to her consecration to then Presiding Bishop Edmund Browning, another of my heroes. Browning patiently listened to each in turn. You may remember Browning's motto at the beginning of his term as Presiding Bishop:

“The Episcopal Church is open to all –*there will be no outcasts.*” When Browning heard the last of the many objections, he stood and said: “In this circumstance, we shall proceed with the ordination.” A standing ovation followed.

Harris had an incredible sense of humor and she tells some wonderful stories from her early days as bishop. Her first confirmation service was at Trinity Church in Copley Square where she confirmed 50 confirmands. A young boy was being presented for confirmation accompanied by his little sister, about 6 years old. Right before Bishop Harris was to lay her hands on her brother’s head, the little girl, in a husky voice, walked right up to Harris and asked: “Hey...are you the queen?” Harris response: “Not quite, yet.” There was thunderous applause and much laughter. After all the confirmations were over, she heard that same little girl from out in the congregation ask: “Mommy can I go up and sit with the queen?” And I bet she did.

Another story happened to Harris after a long day of visitation at two parishes, some distance apart. It was early in her tenure; it was about 9 pm and she was still living at a hotel in Boston close to the cathedral offices. She was dead tired and feeling a little testy when she arrived at the hotel and found the elevator. She had her vestment bag in one hand, her bishop’s crozier in the other, her red shirt and collar and the gold chain of her pectoral cross across her shirt. Before the elevator began its climb, a man stepped into the elevator with her. He looks at her. She looks at him. He says: “I know there’s a story here.” She simply replied: “I’m Little Bo Peep, dressed in drag.”

Harris was a bishop for the whole church and avoided concentrating on only issues of race and gender. She opposed all injustice and loved her people as they loved her. At one time, when a loyal church member bent to kiss her Episcopal ring, the symbol of her authority as bishop, she pulled her hand back, saying: “Forget the ring, sweetie, kiss the bishop.”

When asked: Why do you love the church? She replied:

“I love the church because the it has proven time after time that she can rise to new heights and be more than she has been. There are times when the church exerts holy boldness and imagines what God can do through the likes of us, or what the likes of us can do by the amazing grace of God.”

Jesus was her role model as well as Bishop Browning’s. They remain mine. In today’s Gospel, when Jesus turned his anger loose on the temple establishment, chances are pretty good that he was an advocate for change. When something was unjust, or wrong, Jesus took a stand and defined God’s love. He described the Kingdom of God and the love it offered to all. Jesus venerated the Temple as being his Father’s house and would not see it profaned. What was required on that day, in the temple was a place dedicated to God---until the Christian community could recognize the “new temple” of Jesus’ body, and its extension into us, the mystical body of Christ, the Church.

One day Bishop Harris was asked what word would she leave the church. Her response:

“May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in the world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done: to bring justice and kindness to all.”