

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

September 19, 2021

Regathering Sermon Series, 1 Corinthians 13:4-8

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. *Amen.*

Love does not insist on its own way.ⁱ

In May of 1873, Episcopal Sisters Constance, Hughetta, Thecla, and Amelia arrived in Memphis, Tennessee to launch a school for girls and to operate an orphanage for children left parentless by the Civil War.ⁱⁱ Upon their arrival from the Order of Saint Mary in New York, the Bishop of Tennessee moved out of his residence near the Cathedral. Constance, appointed Sister Superior of this new Foundation, led her small cohort in renovation of the former home for its new use as a school.ⁱⁱⁱ

“Their total assets of \$235 came from one of the sisters selling her watch and jewelry. With this money, they purchased a chalice for \$125, [leaving only] \$110” for their needs. As Saint Mary’s School tells their history, “this sacrificial act ... demonstrated [the Sisters’] first priority – [a] dedication to the spiritual life. [The] chalice was part of their daily chapel service[s] at the school and continues in use by the [contemporary Order] in Tennessee ... a symbol of faith, self-sacrifice, care, compassion, and hope.”^{iv}

After a brisk and busy summer, the Sisters planned an October matriculation, but a Yellow Fever epidemic struck the city. To be clear about that language: “epidemic,” of course, marks the uncommon increase of a disease within a particular area, while a “pandemic” – like the one we are experiencing – marks the swift rise and presence of a disease across multiple regions. Localized Yellow Fever epidemics of the Nineteenth Century brought a terrifying sickness, one that quickly took hold of its host with fever, jaundice, and hemorrhaging from the mouth, nose, and stomach. More than half its sufferers died within a week.

Some eighty years before, Boston, New York, and Philadelphia had suffered their own Yellow Fever epidemics, yet, as sanitary conditions in those more developed cities improved, “hot-spots” of the disease moved south. Unfortunately, physicians and scientists did not know how to interpret this progression. Knowing only that stuffy nights seemed to worsen conditions, they supposed that the sickness somehow travelled in stale air. As remediation, they used toxic, tar-derived cleaning agents in homes and in the streets, often leaving behind puddles of water where mosquitos – later determined the true carrier of the disease – would thrive.

In that fall of 1873, Memphis officials divided the city into separate nursing districts, and the Episcopal Sisters postponed the school's opening so that they could care for the sick, swiftly receiving responsibility for nursing the low-lying Cathedral District. "Except for tea and vespers, which they never missed, [the] Sisters worked from early morning until late at night," their letters record. Understandably exhausted, frustrated, and disappointed by the unexpected and difficult shift in her charge – arriving an educator, yet conscripted as a nurse – Constance wrote to her Mother Superior in New York, confessing her deep dislike of her new cure:

A pouring rain ... just stirs up the horrible filth of this wretched city and leaves muddy pools to stagnate in the sun. There is no drainage – no system of cleaning the city – everyone carries their kitchen refuse into the back alley, and [these] pigs, which run about in the streets, eat it up. I have disinfected this house thoroughly, from garret to cellar, with lime, carbolic acid, and copperas, and today the health officer came and threw tar-water about the place – spoiling our nice [galleries I had just cleaned] ...

Love is patient ... not irritable or resentful, not envious or boastful, not arrogant or rude.^v

Though an especially cold winter in 1873 brought its own difficulties and dangers, its early frosts killed the mosquito population, and the Yellow Fever disappeared as quickly and mysteriously as it had arrived. Constance and her companions were soon able to open the school ... to four students – a number that increased to twenty by the end of December and to forty by the end of the academic year. By the next fall, the school had doubled in size, and, in 1875, the Sisters were able to purchase an adjoining lot to increase space for their programs.

According to a brochure from those years, graduation from Saint Mary's-Memphis would require coursework in English, Mathematics, Science, and Classics. A student who earned the grade of ninety[-percent] was on the Honor Roll[, and, a]fter three years on the Honor Roll, [such a student would receive the newly commissioned] Saint Mary's Gold Medal ...^{vi}

These first years brought a regular – if demanding – rhythm of life for each of the Sisters.^{vii} Yet, the sisters' letters declare that "they lived in a flow of charity and prayers[, making what might have been a very hard] life sweet and all burdens light."

Then, in the summer of 1878, Memphis suffered another surge of Yellow Fever – a strain far more virulent and widespread than the one endured five years before. Of *that* epidemic's early days, one account reads:

Thousands left on trains [and] thousands escaped on carriages[,in] carts, and even on foot ... [Every] road leading out of Memphis [was] a procession of wagons, piled high with beds, trunks, and small furniture ... The scenes at the depots 'could not be pictured ... [When the] last over-crowded train moved[out, loud and heart-rending cries erupted from those left behind.] ... By the middle of the following week, all who desired to escape and had the means of doing so were gone, and the city was still and death-like [save for] the passing of hearses."

When this second epidemic began, Sisters Constance and Thecla were vacationing at Saint Gabriel's School in Peekskill, New York, yet, when word of the outbreak reached the pair, they immediately left for Memphis. Stopping briefly for supplies in New York City, one Rector shared with his congregation, "I have had a varied experience, and have witnessed much, but I have seen no braver sight than that which I saw in front of the Trinity Infirmary just this evening: [those Sisters sitting] alone in the carriage which was to take them to ... the peril[s] of death."

Once again, Constance and the Sisters closed Saint Mary's and turned the school into a dispensary. The sisters also kept open The Church Home orphanage, and local officials requested they add to their rolls the residents of Canfield Asylum, an orphanage for Black children under the sponsorship of the Cathedral. The sisters agreed, and the expanded operation committed to serve the ranks of orphans being added every day because of the disease, "without any distinction as to race or religion" ... in 1878, in Reconstruction Memphis, *without any distinction as to race or religion.*"

From an account of the Sisters bringing children from their Home to the Asylum, which was thought to be in a less affected region than the ravaged Cathedral District:

On our way, we were stopped by a mob of men, who [blocked] our carriage and protested against the children being brought from the infected districts to [this new] neighborhood. One man said, 'I have brought my wife and children from the lower parts of the city to save them from the fever, and I won't have these orphans brought here.' The leader [of the men] flourished a roll of paper which he said was from the mayor, then proceeded to read aloud portions of it in violent language. Sister Constance listened to each man's complaint, and then said with great calmness and gentleness, 'Sirs, is it possible that you would have us refuse to these children the very protection you have obtained for your own?' ... Her words, and still more [her sweet] tones, produced a marked effect upon the [angry mob]. Noticing this, I said quickly, 'Are you not willing to trust the sisters?' [When] A few [of their number] said, 'Yes we are,' and *all* gave way[, allowing the Sisters and the children to pass.]

Love is kind[, and] does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.^{viii}

The succeeding events that Constance recounts in her letters to Mother Harriet in New York set in startling and humbling relief the pandemic inconveniences most of us outside of hospitals and direct-care fields have experienced: two young girls spending two days in a two-room cottage with the unburied bodies of their parents; carts with eight or nine corpses in rough boxes rumbling down the street; the Cathedral Dean writing to the wider Church for aid, pleading: "To meet these requirements *we have absolutely nothing ...*"

Then, as surely seemed inevitable, the fever caught Sister Constance. Though ill, she continued her care for the sick until, finally, her strength gave way. One of the Sisters discovered Constance lying on a couch. “I knew at once that [her condition was grave],” she writes:

[yet, Constance] insisted that it was only a slight headache, and would not listen to my entreaties that she would go to bed, but continued [instead] dictating letters ... Her face was flushed with fever ... She talked of resuming her work among the sick as soon as possible ... They were about to place her on a comfortable mattress; she refused, saying, ‘It is the only one you have in the house, and if I have the fever you will have to burn it.’

Of the night that followed, another Sister wrote that she could hear Constance’s low moan through the evening.

About midnight, [Constance said,] ‘Hosanna,’ repeating it [– ‘Hosanna ... Hosanna ...’] again and again[, more and] more faintly. This was [her] last word. But still she continued the low soft moan of one unconscious, though not in pain, till at 7 A.M., St. Mary’s bell rang out on the air. At that clear sound which she had always loved, whose call she had never refused to answer, the moaning ceased; and at 10 o’clock her soul entered the Paradise of Perfect Love.

Twenty-eight-years old when she arrived to Memphis and only thirty-three when she died, The Episcopal Church’s calendar of Saints annually remembers “Constance and Her Companions” this month – on September 9, the date of Constance’s death.^{ix} The high altar of Saint Mary’s Cathedral memorializes the Sisters’ faithfulness, the only altar in The Episcopal Church dedicated exclusively to the memory of women. Saint Mary’s Episcopal School, with an enrollment of nearly 1,000, continues to serve girls and young women from pre-Kindergarten, through High School.

With the treasured verse of 1 Corinthians threaded into Constance’s story – her story, which so movingly witnesses that poetry’s force – the middle section of the Apostle Paul’s hymn to love builds to an animating crescendo:

Love bears all things: that is, Love is the fundamental material of all Creation, you and me – all of us and all matter – God’s great and glorious expression of Love.

Love believes all things, hopes all things: see, Love is the very essence of all faith, and Love is the source of every righteous, consequential hope.

Love endures all things. Love never ends: Love is the most powerful force in the cosmos, *only* Love will never fail, and nothing can overcome Love, not even death.^x

Most fundamentally, to Love is to set another's needs before one's own, and, as her story testifies, Sister Constance set her heart and soul, bone and teeth, to that loving charge. Those who knew Constance described her as a gifted artist "possessed of charm which might have 'adorned the most brilliant social circle[s].'" Yet, instead, she chose to order her life by Love ... even when she was frustrated, even she was afraid – even when she wondered whether Love could really be enough to confront the world's intractable ills – she loved fully. Never naïve, she understood that *only* in putting the needs of others before her own could she walk with the risen Christ before her, and the Holy Spirit at her back ... even if the cost of Love would be her life, she had made her decision, *she would walk in Love*.

Trinity Church, be sure that only by Love can we partner with God in the redemption and restoration of this broken world ... not that we would all join a religious order and crash the doors of the Brigham with our good intentions ... but that here in these pews, there on the Square, and in every encounter of our daily lives, we would – as unrelentingly, indefatigably – offer one another this gracious ... kind ... patient ... generous ... *Love*.

In the name of God,
Amen.

ⁱ 1 Corinthians 13:5.

ⁱⁱ Saint Mary's School, originally founded in 1847, moved more than once in its early years. These Sisters were reestablishing the school near the Memphis Cathedral.

ⁱⁱⁱ My good friend and seminary classmate, the Very Rev. Barkley Thompson, now serves as Dean of Christ Church Cathedral in Houston, Texas. The Diocese of West Tennessee sponsored Dean Thompson in discernment, and (quite a few years ago now) members of our seminary cohort travelled to Memphis for his ordination to the priesthood. I remember very fondly that service in Saint Mary's Cathedral, especially a visit to its high altar dedicated to the "Martyrs of Memphis." Since that time, the story of "Constance and Her Companions," as annually recalled in The Episcopal Church's compendium of saints, has remained an important inspiration to me.

^{iv} Also ordained with Barkley that day was the Rev. Katherine Bush. As I considered preaching the story of Constance, I hoped to connect with someone who might know the local lore about the events of 1878 and the surrounding years. Katherine – a graduate of Saint Mary's School and recently completing a decade-long tenure as its Chaplain and Director of Religious Life – not only took a phone call from me, but very generously photographed and texted to me (an act of both great kindness and tedium!) some twenty pages of Mary Davis' account of Saint Mary's Episcopal School, *A Remarkable History*. In this sermon, I quote from both Davis and the portions of letters she presents in her history. Not a widely available book, the pages Katherine shared comprise chapter two, "Devotion and Dedication," and I intend this one endnote to stand for the lot of my references.

^v 1 Corinthians 13:4,5.

^{vi} "The financial terms were six dollars per week."

^{vii} Sister Constance kept accounts, supervised each of the associates, managed the academic department, and taught Latin, French, and history. Sister Thecla, who kept the Sacristy of both the neighboring Cathedral and the school, oversaw the music department, instructed piano, managed the primary school, and taught English and Latin grammar. Sister Hughetta taught art, mathematics, and English composition, and oversaw the schoolhouse and its boarding program. Amelia led operations at The Church Home orphanage.

^{viii} 1 Corinthians 13:4,6.

^{ix} From *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* (1994), the account of Constance includes reference to “Sister Clare, from St. Margaret’s House, Boston,” as one who gave her life in service of the Memphis sick. The prayer for the Feast of Constance: *We give you thanks and praise, O God of compassion, for the heroic witness of Constance and her companions, who, in a time of plague and pestilence, were steadfast in their care for the sick and dying, and loved not their own lives, even unto death: Inspire in us a like love and commitment to those in need, following the example of our Savior Jesus Christ; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, now and for ever. Amen.*

^x 1 Corinthians 13:7.