

STORYTIME

The Story of Constance and her Companions



The story of Constance and her companions begins in 1873 when Episcopal nuns from the Community of St. Mary in New York came to Memphis, Tennessee, after the Bishop there asked the Bishop of New York to send some sisters to start a girls' school in Memphis. The sisters who came soon encountered a yellow fever epidemic, and the teachers began nursing sick residents. It was the first of three yellow fever outbreaks in the city over a period of ten years.

Five years later, after the end of the school year, Constance and Thecla, two of the sisters, were resting at the order's mother house in Peekskill, New York, during summer vacation. That happens to be a convent that Fr. Geoff visited many times when he was a young seminarian. It was there that

Constance and Thecla received news on August 5th that the fever had struck Memphis the second time. While the wealthier residents of Memphis, about 30,000 of them, were fleeing the city, the sisters prepared to return. They arranged for money and supplies to be sent ahead of them to Memphis. When they arrived on Aug. 20, they found the cathedral neighborhood to be the city's most infected area. Plans had been made for the nuns to attend to the city's sick during the day and to sleep out in the country every night for safety, but the sisters would have none of that, and stayed in the buildings of the cathedral with sick and suffering.

The nuns and priests moved among the estimated 20,000 Memphians who remained in the city. They comforted the dying, tried to help the sick and took in many orphans. The Rector of Grace Episcopal Church in Memphis, who wrote to his bishop five days before dying of the fever himself, called the sisters the "brave, unshrinking daughters of a Divine Love." Constance, the Mother Superior for the mission work in Memphis and the Headmistress of St. Mary's School for Girls wrote in her diary one night towards the end, "I just crawled home and fairly dropped into bed, first time for three nights," on Aug. 27, 1878, two weeks before she died of yellow fever. She was 33. In September and early October of 1878, yellow fever decimated the city and the volunteers working out of the cathedral. Thecla,

cathedral and school chapel sacristan, who also taught music and English and Latin grammar, died two weeks after Constance.

Sister Ruth, a nurse from Trinity Infirmary in New York who came to help, and the newly ordained assistant rector at the Church of the Holy Innocents, Hoboken, New Jersey, both died five days later. Sister Frances, a newly professed nun given charge of the order's Church Home orphanage, died two weeks later. In the end 38 caretakers succumbed to the fever and died.

All are buried near each other in the city's historic Elmwood Cemetery, one of the South's first rural cemeteries. The high altar at St. Mary's Cathedral in Memphis, consecrated on Pentecost the next year, memorializes the sisters, where it was engraved, "The epidemic did end, for many, in martyrdom, but their call was not to that. It was to one another and to the neighborhood and those particularly who did not have the privilege and means to leave the city."

Today, Episcopalians at the cathedral in Memphis remain in the city once again in the midst of the new pandemic of the coronavirus, but a shelter-in-place order has changed their ministries. They cannot visit the sick or be present for Last Rites for the dying. Previously they hosted a Wednesday morning Eucharist in Sisters' Chapel followed by breakfast, supplemented by music and access to social services, for 150 to 175 community members each week. The ministry was open to all but was focused

primarily on the poor, many of whom were homeless, but now with none of the regular volunteers available, the cathedral staff and volunteers have turned the morning service into an "abbreviated and less-crowded" gathering that includes a prayer, a to-go sack meal and information about the few resources and agencies that are still available.

One of those agencies, and a long-time partner with the cathedral, is the nearby Constance Abbey, an intentional community of Episcopalians that serves the vulnerable in the Memphis Medical District neighborhood surrounding the cathedral. Because the cathedral is surrounded by a number of hospitals, health care workers and medical students often come to the church to pray, and the cathedral often stages health fairs in a nearby park.

The Episcopal Church in this country will commemorate Constance and her companions on Sept. 9, as it has since 1985 when the General Convention added the martyrs to its calendar of commemorations. Depending on the status of COVID-19, St. Mary's will have some version of its annual "Martyrs Weekend" celebration. Normally, there is a Lessons and Carols-type service featuring readings from the martyrs' letters and diaries with music. There is also usually a service at Elmwood Cemetery followed by a picnic. A member of the Community of St. Mary at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee, often comes

for the celebration, bringing with her the chalice that was used at Eucharist during the epidemic. The legacy of the so-called "Martyrs of Memphis," as they are known, will not be forgotten. For their story is our story. It is in every fiber of who we are and what we are about as Christians. Episcopalians at the cathedral have followed the martyrs' example by growing into a hub of worship and services for the community, concentrating on companionship and inequalities in housing and medical care.

In the end, the yellow fever epidemic of 1878, which began in New Orleans, spread up the Mississippi River and moved inland, infected an estimated 120,000 people with the hemorrhagic fever, and 13,000 to 20,000 died.

So there is a strange sense of familiarity with the story of Constance and her Companions in the midst of this current coronavirus pandemic. So let us remember Sister Constance and her Companions, along with all those other compassionate caretakers, first responders, and medical personnel who care for the sick and dying in our time, an example like theirs, of self-sacrificing love and care for one another. For as Jesus said, by our love, they shall know that we are his disciples. AMEN.