

JACK SMITH

Remarks by James Carroll

7-9-22

It was the Sixties.

Remember?

But, as Jack loved to say, if you remember the Sixties, you weren't there.

Jack was there. Marching with Doctor King. Working to stop the war. Helping to invent Earth Day. Supporting women in the right to choose - and to live. Making commitments that defined the rest of his life. Jack was an icon of the Sixties at their best.

But the Sixties had a worst. As Episcopal Chaplain at Boston University, he saw the anguish of the era up close - a trauma that was centered for a terrible time, to cite one example, on an endless series of Bomb-scares at B.U.

For many weeks that year, anonymous phone calls would come in to the university switchboard every few days warning of a bomb set to

go off within a specified time. A lecture hall. A biology lab. The Student Union.

A bomb.

Of course, B.U. officials ordered the target areas evacuated, disrupting classes, seminars, the nightly sleep of dormitory residents. That the scare proved in every case to be a false alarm did not release B.U. from its responsibility to evacuate, evacuate, evacuate.

There was nothing false about the alarm people came to feel, waiting on the sidewalk for the all-clear, trudging back in, eyeing each other with suspicion.

No bomb ever went off at B.U., but students were seized by social despair. When the next call came in, you could almost hear the cry rend the air above Commonwealth Avenue: Oh no!

And then...

Jack Smith, the Reverend John Ferris Smith, had an idea.

“We’ll have a celebration of life!” he said to me, his fellow chaplain. But I was greenest of greenhorns.

“What?” I asked.

“Next time there’s a bomb-scare and the kids pour out onto Commonwealth Avenue, we’ll be ready, throwing open the doors of Marsh Chapel.”

That Neo-Gothic pastiche in the dead center of the campus was the relic of another era. But Jack saw it as more than that. “Imagine,” he said, “That fusty church with a band playing, and loud speakers blaring outside, doors open, drawing people. We’ll have wine and bread and dope...”

“Dope?” I said. “Where will we get dope?”

“Jim,” Jack said so patiently, “The kids will bring the dope.”

And sure enough, that very week a call came in one mid-morning - a bomb set to blow up Hayden Hall at 11 o’clock. Evacuate!

By 10:30, Marsh Chapel was packed with kids - passing jugs of wine, loaves of French bread — and joints. They danced in the aisles to the soon to be legendary James Montgomery Blues Band, whose harmonica riffs carried out into the surrounding streets.

Jack was standing happily on the steps of the sanctuary, taking it in, yes, a celebration of life.

“God, Jack,” I said, “you are a genius.”

“Yes,” he said. “I know.”

Just as it seemed the curse had been lifted, the Chapel secretary appeared beside us, visibly shaken. “I just answered the phone,” she said. “It was him. He said there’s a bomb. A bomb here...in the chapel.”

O Jesus.

“It’s going to go off at noon,” she said.

I looked at my watch. Less than twenty minutes.

“Jesus, Jack. We have to get everybody out of here.”

“Yes, Jim,” he said without hesitating. Then he added, “But you and I are staying.”

“What?”

“We’re staying.”

I was dumbstruck. Dumb.

“Right?” he asked.

Before I could answer, Jack signaled the band to stop. He mounted the highest step of the sanctuary. I stood with him. He raised his hand

and all at once a profound silence fell over the packed chapel - hundreds, all looking at Jack.

“A call just came in,” he said. “Warning of a bomb set for noon. Here.”

A groan went up at once. Oh no! Some kids burst into tears.

Jack went on. “Of course, you may want to leave. It’s probably the prudent thing to do. But you should know—“ He paused, to look at me, then went on. “Father Carroll and I are going to stay. And we invite anyone who feels like it to stay with us.”

A further depth of silence filled the air for a moment. And then a shrieking wail went up...as James Montgomery put his blues harp to his mouth, and the band hit it - just hit it! And the dancing resumed.

The sidewalk outside was soon jammed with other kids drawn by the music and the suspense. I saw them crowding into the chapel, all dancing.

At a minute before noon - the zero hour - Jack stopped the band, and held his watch up. From the highest altar of his life, he led the countdown, until... “5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1 - zero!”

Silence. Silence. The deepest, sweetest silence ever heard in that holy place. Until... Jack Smith reached over and seized James Montgomery's microphone so that he would be heard in the streets outside, all across Boston. And what the Reverend John Ferris Smith said was "Mister Bomb-scare - F-off." He said it twice. "Mister Bomb-scare, F-off."

And the explosion then was of all those B.U. kids cheering with relief, tears, and gratitude.

And it was true: Mister Bomb-scare did F-off, not to be heard from again that year. The curse was broken.

The curse was broken by our own communal courage and resistance - virtues we did not know we had until Jack Smith said so. One could call this his finest moment, but in fact, across Jack's life, there were many moments like that.

Now, of course, you know that, reverend or not, Jack did not say "F" - off. I do not feel free, here, in this sacred space to use the actual "F" word, as Jack did that day. Marsh Chapel, of course, wasn't an

Episcopal Church, like this. And as you also know, The Episcopal Church welcomes you...but only if you mind your manners.

Which reminds me of Jack's favorite joke. Why do Episcopalians hate orgies?

Too many thank you notes.

You know, too, how much Jack loved to make you laugh, how he delighted in being irreverent. But that wasn't just a matter of personal style. Irreverence was a religious act for Jack, a signal of his theology.

Jack believed in God, as this service at his direction makes clear. And he counted himself a follower of Jesus Christ, whose manifesto - the great Beatitudes - Jack just put before us: Blessed are the merciful, the hungry for justice, the peacemakers.

But that was it. As for the rest of religion, Jack rejected false piety, patriarchy, male supremacy, and the racist culture that defines so much of Christian religion in America today. And so he embraced - he preached - what Dietrich Bonhoeffer, martyred by the Nazis, called "religionless Christianity."

Most of you know how Jack loved to preside at this altar. But for Jack, as it was for Jesus, the most sacred table was in the dining room, not the sanctuary. That's why he chose the reading from Isaiah: "The Lord of hosts makes for all peoples a feast of rich food, of well-aged wines." And so it was with Jack - a ministry for all, centered on meals - starting at 40 Prescott Street at B.U., as Tommy Frail just told us - meals made unforgettable with Mary Grace, our dear Gracie.

The Word of God, for Jack, was wherever truth was told: Mathew, Mark, Luke and Jane Austin. The Gospel according to Gatsby. So of course, at Groton School, he preached as much in his literature class as in the pulpit of the that Neo-Gothic Chapel, where his irreverence came into its own as irony. "Can you believe it," he said to me not long after starting at Groton, "the kids are required to come to Church!" But, as Willing Davidson just told us, they were not required to listen. And listen they did.

And as we just heard from Cilla, no one knows these simply human glories of Jack better than she and Sara, Brad and Carol, Sam and

Vanessa, Peter and Lucy - and all of you, friends whom he loved so much.

The Sixties - remember?

Jack Smith, across his long life, wonderfully embodied that hope for peace, justice, and equality. But Jack lived long enough to see the dreams of the Sixties dashed - dashed in part by revelations of our own naiveté. What a backlash we set loose; our counter-culture itself countered, all across the decades.

Jack saw that reaction, and, as everyone who heard him from this pulpit knows very well, he did not lose heart. He sustained the good faith of this precious chapel - with his life-long pal and best friend, Mac Gatch, along with Joe Zorawick and Tracy Lind - together with those of you who supported him in his ministry by laughing at his jokes. The life Jack made here in Wellfleet was a steadfast act of quiet goodness, a fulfillment of the commitments he made half a century ago.

But Jack did not live quite long enough to see how these recent months - even these recent weeks - have brought to a new pitch the heartbreak of our shattered dreams - and the danger of what lies ahead: The human future having fallen into the grip of Vladimir Putin; the blatant upsurge of white supremacy; of well-armed male supremacy; a Supreme Court hell-bent on theocracy - all such claims made in the name of God?

W.W.J.D.?

What would Jack do?

I know this. Jack would not want us to remember him today without acknowledging the struggle that confronts us as citizens.

Here it is. Every few days, our phone rings, and an anonymous voice issues its warning. A bomb will go off - destroying rights you took for granted; dragging women back to subservience; gay and trans-people back into closets. A bomb will go off under elections, destroying American democracy for good. A bomb will go off...destroying... everything.

It is the business of the future to be dangerous. It is our business to be brave.

When the Reverend John Ferris Smith saw Mister Bomb-scare demoralizing his community to the point of despair, he saw also a deep well of communal courage and resistance, and he called on the rest of us to draw upon it. Courage and resistance. Lo and behold, we had it.

Mister Bomb-scare was scared off.

Courage and resistance. Courage and resistance. Lo and behold, we have it still. How do we know?

4 - 3 - 2 - 1 - zero. Jack Smith says so.