**Full Circle**

Little did I know when I walked into St. James’ Episcopal Church in Skaneateles, NY on the third Sunday of October in 2015, my life would be forever changed. As I listened to the sermon, The Rev. Dr. Becky Coerper quietly asked, “Are you where God wants you to be?” Those words have directed so much of my life since then. They have helped me realize God is calling me to finish what I began so many years ago on September 8, 1956, the day I entered the Sisters of Mercy in Rochester, NY at just 17 years old. Coming from a strong Catholic family, it was no surprise that after being taught for twelve years by nuns whom I admired, and wanting to become a teacher, I opted for convent life. My parents were supportive, of course, and so were my teachers at Holy Family High School in Auburn, NY. During the 18 years I spent as a Sister of Mercy, after the first three years of formation consisting of Bible study, meditation, daily Mass, praying the Office, manual work, and college classes, I professed first vows, and became a teacher. I truly loved teaching and being able to spread God’s word and love to my students. After final vows, and receiving my Bachelor’s degree at Marywood University, I was asked to apply to Middlebury College, Bread Loaf School of English to begin study for my Master’s degree. The year was 1971, and proved to be another turning point in my spiritual life because I was thrown into an unfamiliar and non-religious setting. According to the nun who encouraged me to apply, it would be a huge accomplishment to be accepted there because my chances were slim, but I was teaching high school and being groomed for administration so I would need a Master’s degree. Evidently, God had a plan for me because I was accepted, and that summer, I stepped into a most unfamiliar world of 200 men and women, and only four of us were nuns, and not even together in the same building. The dorms were coed as well, and evenly divided among the 99 women and 101 men. Where would I go to church? We were 15 miles up a mountain road from the town of Middlebury in a most amazing setting, but I was worried about how I could practice my vows and be educated at the same time. However, my first day in class, my professor, Dr. Bart Giamatti eased my fears as he started discussing ***Dante’s Divine Comedy***, and said, “If you are not in this class to change your life, and to delve deeply into God’s mystery, please drop out now.” Wow! The future president of Yale was to be a driving force and friend during my five summers at Bread Loaf. We had deep discussions about the way God works in the world, and why literature can bring us closer to Him. He also knew of the Benedictine Priory in Weston Vermont, and after some research, I decided to go there each Sunday for services. Again, God was leading me to a place of peace, love, and the music of Taize. After services, the monks were always ready to talk to anyone who needed advice or encouragement. I learned so much about my life with God that first summer. That was the beginning of questioning my vocation as a nun. I saw laypeople could bring God into their work just as much as I was trying to do. Returning to convent life that year began a deep period of soul searching. and discussing with a priest friend what I should do. I made the decision to leave, but since it would be an involved process, it was not until June of 1973 that I received dispensation from my vows. That summer I returned to college as a lay person, not knowing what the future held, but firmly believing I could do more as a lay person in the world than I was doing as a nun, protected from the realities of the world. Talk about idealism! Again, God was in charge, and there on the bulletin board was published a job opening for an English teacher in Berlin, NH. Of course, I applied, got the job, and after that summer moved to a town I did not know, 400 miles from family and friends, and thought, “I can do this.” Talk about being scared, I was petrified, and I hadn’t even considered I had never taught in a public school. I was sure God would help me because without even trying, I immediately found a great place to live, and a church nearby. I became very involved in the church as a lector, choir director and Sunday school teacher which helped me nourish my relationship with God. It was much harder in the classroom because although I still loved teaching, I was not able to speak as freely about my beliefs as I had in the Catholic schools. Teaching during Holy Week that first year was especially difficult, but at least the services were after classes were out for the day. It seemed as if I were sacrificing much more in this life than I ever did in the convent. The summer of 1975, I received my Master’s degree at Middlebury, and I was on my way home to Berlin, and then planning a trip to Auburn, when somehow, I fell asleep at the wheel, and the next thing I knew I was waking up going down an embankment, swerving around with a car turning over and over and landing upside down. I was strapped in, and remember praying, “Please God, don’t let me die.” The next thing I knew some women came along and helped get me out, and bring me to Dartmouth Hitchcock Hospital in Hanover, NH. Talk about God having a plan. They were nurses from the hospital on their way home from work and saw everything that happened. After that accident, and a time of recovery, I decided I would leave Berlin that year and look for jobs in New York closer to family. However, in December of 1975, my future husband’s wife died, and in March he asked me to dinner. I knew Bob as the art teacher, and we worked together on the school’s literary magazine and school newspaper. We began a friendship that both of us enjoyed, but nothing serious was taking place, and I was applying to Oxford University to begin study for a PHD so I could teach in college and return to New York State. I was accepted, and spent 1977 at Oxford, but found out I was really missing Bob’s companionship, and he mine, so I decided upon returning from Oxford, I needed to know what the future held. I had an interview scheduled to become department chair at Skaneateles High, and I was sure it would be everything I wanted. Bob said he wanted to take our relationship to the next step, and truly so did I. I cancelled the interview, and from September of 1977 we were together, married in 1980, until Bob died in 2004. That year began a profound change in my life; not only had I lost my husband, I developed a severe infection after back surgery, and ended up in Concord Hospital for 60 days. I was supposed to have the surgery before Thanksgiving vacation and that would get me back to school in January. However, I had the surgery on November 18, 2004; and I left the hospital on February 3, 2005. After two other attempts to clear the infection, I would be sent home, only to return, so the day after Christmas, I returned to the hospital and was told I would be there until the infection was gone. Those days were days of prayer and meditating about God’s plan for me. Luckily, my surgeon, Dr. Levy got to know me, and we began talking about various topics when religion came up. He told me he was an Episcopalian, and I told him how when I attended Oxford, I went to services every Sunday at Christ Church Cathedral for both Matins and the Eucharist. He asked me if he could ask his priest to come to visit me, and of course, I agreed. That began weekly visits, and great discussions. My friend, Ellie, from Berlin, another Episcopal priest, also kept in touch. Where was my priest in all of this? After all, I led his choir; was a lector; volunteered for various activities and helped at services. Needless to say, God was leading me in a direction I had never planned. Then, on April 29, 2007, I was received into the Episcopal Church at St. Barnabas in Berlin by The Rev. Gene Robinson, Bishop of New Hampshire. Everything about my decision felt right. When my Catholic priest called and asked me, “Did I do something wrong?” My only response was, “It was what you didn’t do.” Ellie had given me the necessary lessons to join the Episcopal church; she brought the Eucharist when my own priest did not. I found my place in the Episcopal Church in New Hampshire, and because of the shortness of priests in the North Country, I became very involved, not only as a choir member, but also as a lector, acolyte, and Communion minister. As a worship leader, I led services on the third Sunday of every month and planned a once a month service at the nursing home where we would read lessons, give a little reflection, and sing all the “old hymns” the residents loved. My heart was full. I was ready to make application to become a Deacon, but once again, God had other plans. I retired from teaching so I knew I would have time for the studies involved, but I was unable to maintain the house my husband and I shared. I was getting further and further into debt, because he died without life insurance or survivor benefits, so I borrowed against the house; of course, could not manage the payments after a few years, lost the house and declared bankruptcy. My only choice, move back to Auburn, NY nearer to family and some sort of security. Almost six years ago, the first thing I did was to look for an Episcopal Church, and since the one in Auburn was in transition, I did not get a sense of belonging when I attended services there. Someone suggested I try St. James’ in Skaneateles, and now I have come full circle to where I began my story. At. St. James’, I found a church family which encourages participation, and makes sure everyone is welcomed as I was from the moment I stepped inside the doors. At the Communion rail that first Sunday, Becky asked me my name, which astounded me, and made me wonder why she cared. It did not take long for her and Nancy Graham to touch base with me and welcome me with open arms. I have grown immensely in my faith as a Stephen Minister, a volunteer, a lector, a choir member, Communion minister, and Worship leader. I experience a deep and loving relationship with God, and I hope I contribute something worthwhile to my parish family. I have discussed my calling with my priest, Becky, and she supports me in this. God has blessed me in so many ways and has given me so much grace as a member of St. James’ and in this last chapter of my life, I hope to prove worthy of the calling and commitment I want to make to my Lord and my God.