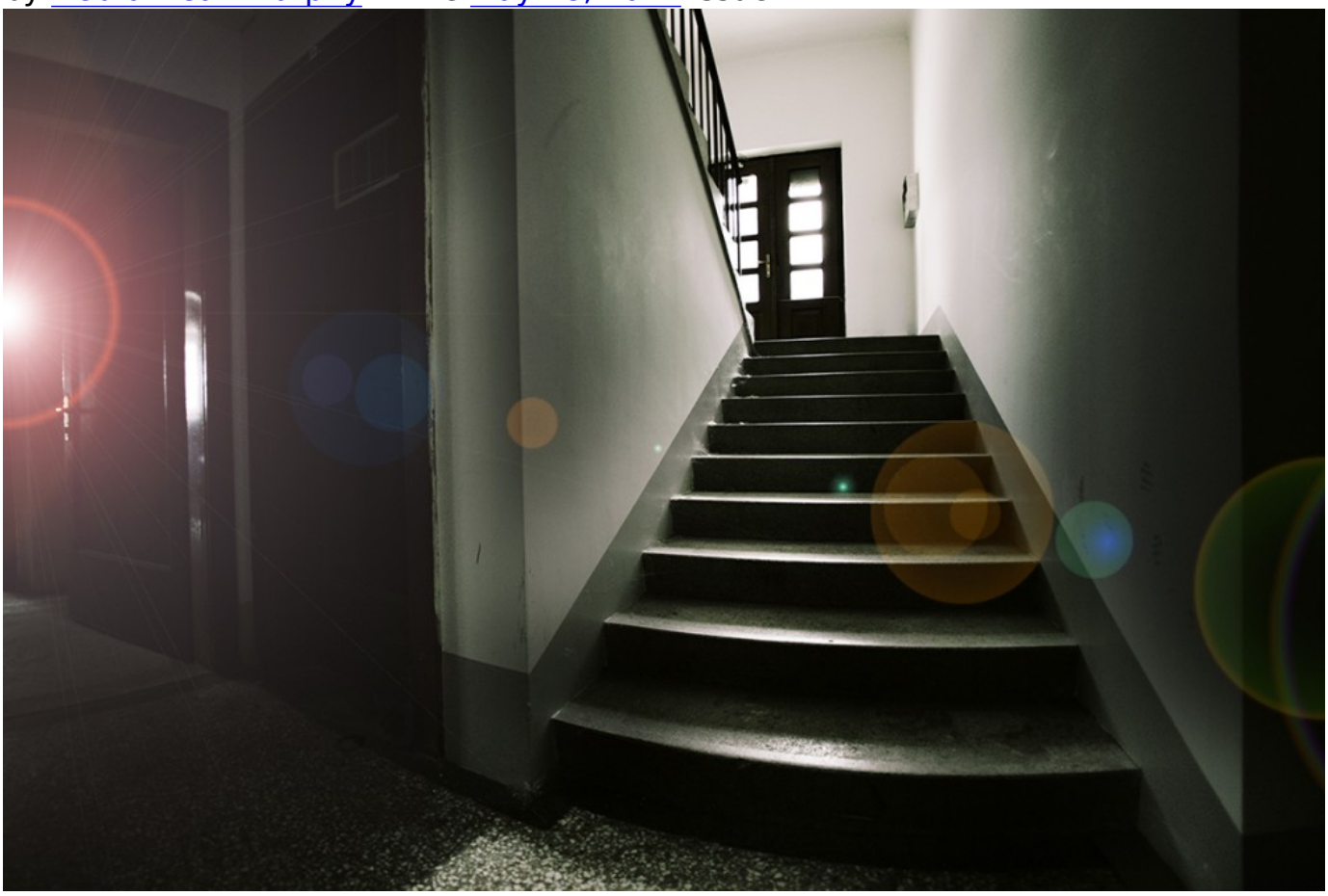
Creating a space for everyday peace

On Fridays in the church basement, I see glimpses of something precarious and beautiful.

by Debra Dean Murphy in the May 18, 2022 issue



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In my first column in these pages I wrote that beauty perceived in art or nature can morally impel us to seek symmetry of relations in our lives as a matter of justice. Beauty, thus, is fairness in every sense of the word. In this my last column, I tell a slice of a story, my own story, of entering into and being changed by beauty.

Shortly before Russia invaded Ukraine, a group of seminary students and I began a weekly online course on the history of Christian nonviolence. We met on Wednesday evenings, and for the first month or so it was dark outside when we logged on. It

seemed fitting to feel the weight of the world together in the darkness those first few weeks of the war, those first few weeks of getting to know one another. We began each session with a brief vespers liturgy, summoning the light we longed for and praying for peace—in besieged Ukraine and in our anxious selves.

On Friday afternoons for many months now, my friend and colleague Jess and I have gathered with a group of new friends in the basement of a historic, downtown church. As in many cities large and small, the affluence that established and continues to maintain that imposing structure is absent from the neighborhood where it sits. But many of the struggling folks we meet there every week live nearby, some of them unsheltered and on the street, others newly housed.

We don’t run a program or offer social services, though we first met them through an agency with a “housing first” philosophy—an approach to assisting homeless drug users that rejects the “treatment first” model and its insistence on demonstrating readiness for housing. “Housing first” assumes instead that a stable living situation is a precondition of recovery and a basic human right.

On Wednesday nights my students and I surveyed the sweep of the church’s teachings, texts, movements, figures, and communities devoted to peaceableness and its many expressions. We marveled early on, as one always does, at the uncompromising pledge to nonviolence of pre-Constantinian Christians. We engaged some recent scholarship, as well as a few neglected and sidelined sources, both historic and contemporary. Many of these helpfully decentered statecraft and the politics of war as the default frames for determining the substance and contours of the nonviolent way of the gospel. Still, the people of Ukraine were never far from our thoughts as we wondered together week by week: What are the things that make for peace?

Friday afternoons at the downtown church can seem pretty ordinary. Jess and I take turns preparing a meal and, as folks arrive, someone might set out the silverware and glasses; someone else (Vinnie, usually) might brew the coffee. Others find a seat and sit quietly alone. We have some regulars, and there is almost always a new person or two. We eat together and talk politely around the table, as people in church basements do. Afterward, we invite everyone to join us for conversation, which we make clear isn’t group therapy; nobody here needs fixing in our view. Most people stay, though we give good wishes and an offer of leftovers to those who don’t. Then we arrange our chairs in a circle.

Our hope in seeing to this work every week is to create a space for people whose difficult lives are made more difficult by bureaucratic violence and other kinds of harm, that they might know their own dignity and belovedness. Using the circle process of the restorative justice movement, which is both scripted and improvisational, we talk about things like community, anger, friendship, change, work, boundaries, and joy.

I've come to believe that all of us together are practicing what political scientist Roger Mac Ginty calls "everyday peace." Which doesn't mean it's always peaceful. It is no picnic on the days when chaos takes over and exhausts us all. And the fact that we have Narcan nearby is a constant reality check. But this just confirms that peace is always provisional and often precarious—in homes, workplaces, and churches; between nations and among friends.

This is true even when our couple of hours on a Friday go smoothly, which they mostly do. The reciprocity and solidarity that Jess and I try to embody is always only on a micro level; we do not know the fullness of the lives of these friends, nor they ours. We are glimpsing peaceableness, not possessing it; we are all practicing plenitude—of table fellowship, time, and kindness—as resistance to the violent systems and the fictions of scarcity which tell vulnerable persons that there is not enough, that *they* are not enough.

When John goes on and on in the circle, offering encouragement to Erin who has just dared to be human in a way I need to learn from, we are all participating, however fleetingly, in the things that make for peace. And it is beautiful.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Everyday peace."