

An Alternative to Whining

John 17:20-26

Acts 16:16-34

I have a friend named Warren on Facebook. I've actually never met him, not sure I ever will. I was commenting on something a friend from high school said one day, and someone else's comment caught my eye. That's been such a long time ago now that I have no memory at all of what it was, but whatever it was he said, I was intrigued. Now, this was before the advent of all of the privacy settings, so yes, I stalked. I went to Warren's FB page to see who this guy was, and I was startled to see that we had another friend in common, a minister in this presbytery. I couldn't figure that out at all. Warren was a priest living in Massachusetts and was friends with a guy in Boulder who still walks a bit on the wild side, and a minister in East Tennessee. We had no apparent connection at all to each other, and yet, we were connected.

Today's two readings from the lectionary seem to be as disparate and unlikely a pairing as Warren and his Facebook friends. In John, we have a portion of Jesus' prayer for his disciples not long before he is crucified, the part of the prayer where he prays for unity above all else. And then in Acts, Luke is reporting on Paul's first stint in prison. It looks for all the world like they have nothing in common, no apparent connection to each other, but yet, they are connected.

Let me start with Acts. Paul and Silas are still in Philippi, and they are headed to that same place of prayer outside the city walls where they encountered Lydia in last week's readings. Along the way they encounter a young woman who, in today's vernacular, we might call a Parseltongue. The Bibles in your pew says she had a spirit of divination, but the literal translation is that she had the spirit of a python, a snake, probably a reference to the legend about the serpent that guarded the Delphi oracle where people would go to have their future's told. Luke's points here are clear: her "gift" if you want to call it that, was of dubious origin, but her owners didn't care as long as they continued to make a fortune off of their fortune teller.

Maybe you've known someone who wasn't particularly happy to be healed of some kind of malady; they missed the attention that being sick got them, or maybe it made a useful crutch that kept people from expecting too much of them. Or, like in this situation, being sick provided them a source of income. Luke never mentions how the slave girl felt about Paul healing her, but her owners clearly were not happy about it. With her all normal again, now they were going to have to get real jobs and work like everyone else. So they did what most people do when they are angry and want to get rid of someone – they spread stories that made people afraid of them, afraid they were a threat to their freedom and happiness and way of life. And the docile crowd of sophisticated urbanites, that only moments before was going about its business – shopping and running the kids to their play dates, and going to the gym – they turned into an angry mob and tore into Paul and Silas, beating them with sticks and anything else they could get their hands on, then threw them into the deepest, darkest dungeon where they couldn't possibly get out and cause more social unrest.

Now I don't know about you, but if I were in Paul and Silas' shoes I'd be feeling pretty sorry for myself right about now. Here they are, doing what God had called them to do, traveling the world and spreading the gospel, and they do this good deed, this miracle to give this poor girl her

life and health and maybe even her freedom back, and look at the thanks they get for it. They're beat up and thrown in jail by a bunch of narrow-minded Greek rednecks. And all over trumped up charges. If it was me I'd have been protesting all the way to the jail, defending myself against their slanderous accusations, and then, once that door slammed shut behind me, the pity party would begin. Their imprisonment was judicially unjust, and frankly, it just doesn't seem fair that God would let something like that happen to Paul after all that Paul had sacrificed for God.

But there are no pity parties being thrown in that jail cell. No whining. There's singing, happy songs, joyous songs. There are shouts of "halleluiah!" and "God is good!" and "Give thanks to the Lord!" There's hand clapping and "Amen's" and holy laughter. Not at all the sorts of things one typically hears out of the depths of a maximum security prison.

And not at all the sorts of things one typically hears out of us when the chips are down and we run square into unfairness and injustice, or just plain old ill-fortune.

I'm sure that the psychologists in the congregation would have interesting things to say about whining and self-pity from a behavioral standpoint, but this story begs us to think about how we respond during hard times from the vantage point of faith. Can we still find reason to praise God and be grateful, despite hardship? Do we still have the sense that God is good, even when ill winds blow our way?

Remember my friend, Warren? A couple of weeks ago he had major surgery and spent a week in the hospital. His recovery will be slow, and difficult. But these are the kinds of things he's posted on Facebook: "Contentment" "Monday dawns crisp and clear and full of possibilities. God is good and my family is a gift." No whining, no pity parties, no "why me?" He has also written a post on his blog about physical ailments and "thin places", the sorts of places in time and space where the lines between us and God seem especially, well, thin, and we are more likely to connect to God in profound ways. Usually we think of thin places as geographical locations, but sometimes our circumstances have that same effect on us, especially the difficult ones. Wilderness as a "thin place", if you will. Here is a brief excerpt of what he wrote:

"Illness, grief, suffering, drought, cold, wind, rain, dark, snow, heat and all the rest can be the ways in which we are drawn, driven or led to the "thin places" in our lives that help us to regain perspective. For me during this time of illness I've been reminded of two very important things. 1. God is God and I am not; and 2. Healing takes as long as it takes.

"Sometimes it takes a journey to the thin places for us to be reminded of our inabilities so that we can live anew in God's endless capabilities in our lives and in the life of the world.

"For today I pray for the grace and humility to be content with my "Not-Godness" and the patience to be led by God to health, wholeness and healing following the pilgrims' way for as long as it takes."

This challenges me as I go into my own surgery this week. Frankly, I'm not real big on pain, and I'm really not big on physical limitations and forced idleness. Recovering with any degree of grace will be difficult for me. I will freely, but not happily admit it: I tend to be a whiner. I like living on the sunny side of the street.

I wonder, though, if this could be our common challenge in the days to come. I wonder if we can pledge to each other that, whatever hardships we may be facing in our lives right now, maybe economic, maybe personal, emotional pain, maybe physical pain, maybe grief, but whatever it is, that we will not sink into the mire of self-pity, but find ways to proclaim the goodness and greatness of God; that we will look at our struggles as a thin place, a place to encounter and be encountered by God. Can we commit ourselves to noticing the amazing works of God going on all around us and in us, even if we've been thrown into a dungeon of sorts? But even more, can we pledge to each other that we won't keep what we have seen and experienced a secret private thing; that we will write about it or share it with each other over coffee after church and at the dinner table?

In Jesus' prayer in John he says something interesting. He isn't just praying for the 12 disciples. He says he is also praying for future disciples, the people who, in days and years to come, will come to believe in him because of the words of his disciples. The jailer in the story of Paul and Silas? He is one of them. He comes to believe, not just because his prisoners were miraculously released from their cells, but because of the joyful words and songs and outlook of the disciples, because their God was greater than any pain that could be inflicted on them, any injustice that could be done to them.

How do we respond when the chips are down? What comes out of us when the winds of ill-fortune blow our way? Do people come to belief because of our response to pain? Are they inspired by our reaction to hardship? Are God's glory and goodness visible, even through our pain? May God give us grace that it may be so.